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CEDARCREEKCHURCH

Looking Ahead - 5.5.2024 - Losing My Religion

May 5, 2024

If you were teaching a child how to respond when receiving a gift, would you encourage them to try to earn it, or to simply respond with gratitude and thankfulness?

So often, we think we have to earn God's love and approval—his *grace*—but scripture reminds us that it is a gift.

Ephesians 2:8

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God.

As we receive this gift and realize how precious it is, our lives will begin to look different. How could they not? Such a gracious gift will leave us wanting to live in immense gratitude and shape our actions because we know we received something we didn't deserve.

So as we conclude this series, take some time to consider how you view the Father. Is he someone who is demanding and angry, or is he someone who lavishly pours out undeserved grace and mercy if we only accept it?

Finally, consider recording your responses in a journal, whether digital or hard copy. It's a great way to be able to look back on the adventure God has you on.

Prayer:

Lord, I am not worthy of your love, and there is nothing I can do to earn the grace and mercy you offer me. Yet, Jesus willingly died as an offering for my sin. Help me accept this precious gift and live from it. Let my life shine as an example of your great love, so others may come to know you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Series Theme Verse:

Romans 6:14

Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

Discussion Questions:

Icebreaker: Share a time when someone showed you unexpected grace.

Why can the concept of grace be so challenging for people to accept?

Read Ephesians 2:8-10. What surprises you the most in this passage? How are you encouraged?

How does knowing that God extended grace to you impact how you treat others?

How can you live from a place of grace?

This post was written by Kelly Pagel, the Director of the LivingItOut.

Jesus as Lord and Savior - Losing My Religion

May 6, 2024

Can you remember a time in your life when a parent or adult shamed you? Maybe you begged and begged, hoping they would find favor with you instead of taking something away, criticizing you, or making you feel insignificant. Perhaps you would have done anything to avoid feeling that shame again.

We tend to view our relationship with our Heavenly Father in a similar way. We feel shame about the things we've done and don't want God to be disappointed or punish us. The burden becomes so heavy that it leads us away from God, or even prevents us from seeking him for the first time.

This religious game is based on our misconceptions about what God wants from us, but his grace doesn't work that way. It frees us from playing the game altogether. Grace is a gift that we don't deserve—a favor from God. Not because we have done enough good for God to like us, but

because God created us and wants a relationship with us, his beloved children.

This is the Good News and the hope that we have as Christians. We cannot save ourselves. It is only through Jesus' death and resurrection that we can come to the Father and experience his grace.

Ephesians 2:8-9

⁸ God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹ Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

We are saved by God's grace when we believe. We cannot boast about receiving it, because we didn't do anything to earn it. It is offered out of God's unconditional love for us.

This is a reminder that you don't have to beg God to like you or to have a relationship with him. He is not tallying how often you fail, nor does he want to shame or punish you when you do. There is no need to avoid him out of fear—because you are already forgiven—and he delights in you when you seek him out to know him more.

Zephaniah 3:17

"For the Lord your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs."

Questions:

Are you suffering from a past shame that is preventing you from seeking out or developing a relationship with God?

Are you still playing the religious game, trying to earn God's favor and avoid his shame? Are you ready and willing to live from God's grace because you believe Jesus is your Lord and Savior?

Next Steps:

Fully accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, if you haven't already.

Surrender your shame to God in prayer, and ask that he calm your fears.

Do something that gives you delight in God.

Prayer:

Jesus, you are both Lord and Savior. To accept that denies me of my religion. I do not have to live in shame to be in your presence. Let grace abound in me, Lord. I live from your grace, not in trying to earn your favor. Amen.

Series Theme Verse:**Romans 6:14**

Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

This post was written by Becca Roberts, a regular contributor to the LivingItOut Devotional.

Choose Love - Losing My Religion

May 7, 2024

John 3:16 NIV

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God so loves us—how lucky and blessed we are! Yet we live in a world where we feel immense pressure, tension, burnout, and stress. God so loves us, but sometimes, our view becomes blurry and askew. We fall into the distorted belief that he is frowning down on us for our choices and decisions.

Our human nature gets the very best of us at times. How do we fight against the forces of darkness that relentlessly try to keep us in this place of numbness and fear? Quite simply, with love, as a child of our Heavenly Father. Our biggest fan should be our greatest desire. He loves us so deeply that “the very hairs on your head are all numbered” (Matthew 10:30). We are the sons and the daughters of the almighty, placed with a purpose to love fiercely and serve out of joy. We are his masterpiece!

Ephesians 2:10

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Look around you—every object, situation, and obstacle—everything you see is temporary. This is a momentary journey that will not last. One day, we will join our incredible father in heaven, and we all should hope to hear the words, “Well done, my good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23).

When life is overbearing, you are feeling lost, or temptation is getting the best of you, remember our Father so loved us that he placed the Holy Spirit inside of us, nestled in our hearts, as a guide to direct us (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). We can use this gifted compass as our earthly navigational tool to combat what is not of God.

So accept God's grace and run wild in adventure with him.

Love! Serve! Explore your uniqueness! Grow!

Don't stay comfortable—embrace your unique purpose and place while on this short ride and strive to hear, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

Questions:

What is holding you back right now from what you could do tomorrow to make a difference? What do you think you were saved for?

Next Steps:

Make some quiet time today to spend in prayer with God. Let him guide your heart into an action step that you could take to fulfill a part of your purpose. Attend GrowthTrack to learn more about how God has wired you to make a difference.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, fill my heart with love. Help me shed the layers of doubt, pressures, burn out, stress, and temptations. Replace them with warmth, peace, love, and light. Let me do the good works you have equipped me to do so that I may serve and love out of a place of faith and not obligation. Help me strive each day to hear you say, “well done”! It's in your name I pray, amen.

Series Theme Verse:

Romans 6:14

Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

This post was written by Keisha Wiechers, a first-time contributor to the LivingItOut Devotional.

Adopted Through Grace - Losing My Religion

May 8, 2024

What comes to mind when you think of *grace*? It is a word we often hear in church and Christian circles, but many do not fully grasp its meaning. Grace is God's gift of forgiveness, given freely to us through Jesus Christ's sacrifice. His death paid the debt for our sins and laid the foundation for an eternal relationship with God.

Before Jesus, we see humanity needing to offer sacrifices to God to atone for their sins. Jesus was sent as our Savior because God *loved* his creation and knew we could never do enough to earn his favor. God's grace, alone, freed us from our sins and led to him adopting us into his family.

We were created to enjoy an eternal relationship with God, not to religiously follow a set of laws. Yes, there are rules, but they were created—*out of love*—to safeguard us and keep us holy (Exodus 20, Luke 10:26-28).

Think about it this way: As children, our parents established rules, like a curfew, to prevent us from getting hurt. They were created, because of us, to keep us safe. Our parents did not have children for the purpose of fulfilling these rules. Similarly, humans were created for more than obeying God's laws.

Sometimes "religion" overemphasizes rules and can get in the way of us accepting God's grace and pursuing a relationship with him. This does not mean we should do whatever we want because we have grace. Rather, it is relearning why God created us in the first place—out of love.

This grace inspires us to imitate God's love and goodness (Galatians 5:22-23). When we see ourselves as God's children and know that we are safe in his family, it develops our character and creates in us a desire to follow the example Jesus provided. We learn that we will not be kicked out of God's Kingdom, because we have already been forgiven for our mistakes—past, present, and future. Instead, we can learn from them and continue to grow in God's character.

Let us go about our days knowing there is nothing that can separate us from God. We are safe and secure as his sons and daughters forevermore.

Ephesians 5:1:

Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children.

Questions:

How can we imitate God's character in daily life?

Why is the gift of grace so significant?

Next Steps:

Make plans to join a Group for the Summer Semester to connect with a like-minded community of Jesus followers who will show you the love and grace of God. The Groups directory will open May 25th.

Consider baptism to declare your faith in Jesus and to publicly show your adoption into God's family.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for showing me your grace each day. May I never take your grace for granted. Encourage me to show your love to those around me, and remind me that religion is not about a set of rules to follow. It is about a grace-filled, eternal relationship with you. Help me to exemplify your image and grow in the fruit of the Spirit. In Jesus' name, amen.

Series Theme Verse:

Romans 6:14

Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

This post was written by Isabelle Billnitzer, a regular contributor to the LivingItOut Devotional.

The Business of Changing Lives - Losing My Religion

May 8, 2024

When I was about six years old, my dad offered to pay me and my brother \$2.00 each if we could fill our buckets with sticks from the backyard. I remember running around as fast as I could, picking up all the sticks before my little brother could grab them. I wasn't going to stop until I pleased my dad and earned my money!

Many of us work to gain God's love. However, Jesus paid the price to set us free. He endured the suffering we deserve. He bought the ticket that allows us to be near God. We can do nothing to earn that—it's a free gift.

Ephesians 2:8

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God.

Just because Jesus has covered us with grace doesn't mean we should wait around for heaven to show up. On the contrary, we now have an incredible purpose laid out before us! In the words of Dallas Willard, "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning."

Ephesians 5:2

Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God.

Filled with the love of Christ, we have the opportunity to pour out that love for others. We have the chance to bring other people into God's family. It isn't a chore we have to accomplish to earn God's favor, but an adventure we are called to partake in.

I remember feeling so proud when I filled that bucket to the brim with sticks and my dad handed me those two, \$1.00 bills. My brother only finished with a handful of mulch and tree bark at the bottom of his bucket, but Dad paid him \$2.00 as well. I was indignant! How was that fair?

You see, my dad paid us the same amount because he wanted each of us to do our best and be proud of what we accomplished together. He never expected perfection.

The same is true of our Heavenly Father. God isn't holding eternity over our heads, like a reward for getting things right. Instead, he is calling us into the business of changing lives. There is nothing better than helping someone experience God!

Questions:

When are you tempted to work hard to earn God's grace? What is one thing you can do to pour God's love out to the people around you this week?

Next Steps:

Make a list of people in your life who God is inviting you to love. Write down ways that you can serve them this week: bake them a batch of cookies, invite them out for coffee, or offer to help weed their flower beds.

Go through GrowthTrack and learn about your God-given gifts and passions. Find a place to serve, and watch God use you to make a difference. If you have already gone through GrowthTrack, ask God if there is a different way he wants to use you in this new season of life.

Prayer:

Father, sometimes I forget that your grace is a free gift. Please remind me of that when I am tempted to earn your love. Help me to hear your invitation to love others, and let my heart respond, "Lord, I am coming!" (Psalm 27:8). I love you. Amen.

Series Theme Verse:

Romans 6:14

Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

This post was written by Lydia Snyder, a regular contributor to the LivingItOut Devotional.

The Best Gift We Can Receive - Losing My Religion

May 9, 2024

Have you ever unintentionally caused someone pain? I know I have.

I remember back in junior high making a comment to my friend that I thought would get a laugh. It didn't! My "joke" hurt her feelings, and she refused to talk to me for several days. I felt ashamed for what I had done and wrote her a letter, apologizing for my actions. Luckily, she accepted my apology, and we returned to being good friends again.

We have all been there—we've said or done something that unintentionally hurt someone's feelings. Sometimes, we can mend the relationship, like I did with my friend, by apologizing or through some act of kindness. Other times, the relationship isn't that easy to restore.

Despite our imperfections and relational struggles, our relationship with Jesus is one we can rely on. Regardless of our failures and shortcomings, we can always expect to receive grace.

Jesus understood temptation. In Matthew 4:1-11, Jesus faced three major temptations from Satan during his 40 days of fasting and prayer in the wilderness. Satan first challenged Jesus to turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger, then he encouraged Jesus to throw himself down from the temple, suggesting that God would send angels to save him. And lastly, Satan showed Jesus all the nations of the world and offered them to Jesus, if only he would bow down and worship Satan.

Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for us by dying on the cross to save us from our sins. Because of this sacrifice, we know we can come to him when we

cause pain to others or make a bad decision. This relieves us from the burden of shame.

Romans 6:14

Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

Learning this brings us comfort and peace. Understand that we can always seek refuge in the arms of Jesus, regardless of our circumstances. What a great gift God has given us!

Questions:

In what areas of your life have you had to ask for God's grace?

Have you asked for God's grace when others have caused you pain?

Have you shown God's grace to others when they have fallen short?

Next Steps:

Each day, set aside some time to be alone with God to reflect on areas of your life where you need his grace. Feel free to ask for grace and forgiveness.

Each week, look for ways to show God's grace to others who fall short. Don't be afraid to ask for his guidance to discover ways to show grace.

Prayer:

Dear God, I know I have fallen short at times. It is hard for me to admit it because it can bring shame. It is not easy for me to come to you to ask for your grace. Help me remember that your grace is unconditional, no matter what the circumstances. Show me ways that I can show your grace to others. Amen.

Series Theme Verse:

Romans 6:14

Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

This post was written by Connie Disbro, a regular contributor to the LivingItOut Devotional.

Reflections - 5.10.2024 - Losing My Religion

May 10, 2024

Through this series, we have explored the tendency of wanting to earn our way into God's kingdom under our own power, rather than simply accepting his invitation of grace with gratitude and thanks.

Take some time to reflect on what God is offering you today. Find a quiet moment to reread the verses that resonated with you, such as Ephesians 2:8-10, Ephesians 5:1, or Romans 6:14. Then, spend time with God praising him for his amazing gift of grace.

Prayer:

Father, your amazing grace is nothing I deserve but something you so willingly and graciously offer me. Show me where I am prone to try to earn your love, and help me, instead, simply accept the gift your Son Jesus is giving me. Amen.

Series Theme Verse:

Romans 6:14

Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

This post was written by Kelly Pagel, Director of the LivingItOut.