

# The Last Word

## The Skim-milk Gospel of Cheap Grace

**Robbie Castleman**

National Director for RTSF/USA and Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology at John Brown University

### Discipleship and Evangelism

One of the textbooks I use in the class is Bonhoeffer's, *Cost of Discipleship*. When I first decided to use the text, I was afraid it might really 'miss' with this generation of students. I mean, the Vietnam war, my war, seems like ancient history to them. The history of the Third Reich is often reduced to an edgy racism for skinheads and hateful people and the background for lots of old spy movies on late-night TV. However, I was, and am, convinced that many evangelicals in the USA today, are in peril of just the kind of power-trip seduction that confused kingdom and culture, nation and faith, and blinded church-going Germans to the false prophets of the Third Reich who did all sorts of things in the name of Jesus while calling other people 'evil-doers'.

Bonhoeffer saw the church of his day bowing the knee to 'cheap grace' and wrote:

Cheap Grace is the deadly enemy of our church. It is grace without price: grace without cost! ... Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine ... an intellectual assent ... Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner ... Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. (Part I, Chapter 1)

Bonhoeffer's idea of 'cheap grace' is flourishing in our churches, on our campuses, in our homes, and we don't even see it for what it is. Salvation is sold as fire insurance, Jesus is reduced to correct propositional formulas and worship is all about us and the way we like it no matter how many times we sing, 'it's all about you, Jesus'. Cheap grace sells us a comfortable Jesus to whom we sing affectionate valentines. Cheap grace substitutes the fear of the Lord for a fear of the world. Cheap grace hides our light under wonderfully pious lampshades, and cheap grace renders the salt of the earth as just so much tasteless landfill.

Every semester I tell 36 wonderful students in this class: 'Salvation is a free gift of God's grace earned by the work of Jesus Christ alone. And this free gift will cost you everything'.

Bonhoeffer calls the obedience of following Jesus, the discipleship of 'costly grace'. And this is a brand-new idea to many, maybe even most, in my classroom.

My students have had all sorts of reactions to Bonhoeffer's challenging book and his commentary on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that is part of it. Two reactions, however, stand out. First, it has made them angry. They come to my office, sometimes in tears, and ask, 'Why didn't I know this before?' Now, sometimes, it's their own ears. Despite the faithfulness of their parents or their faith community, or their pastor's best exposition of the word, or their most biblical of Sunday School teachers or youth pastors, it is only now, in the new autonomy of these precious college years, that they finally have 'ears to hear'.

But too often, they are angry because they really have never heard the gift and demand of the gospel before. They know every lyric from the top ten on the 'CCM' scene (Contemporary Christian Music), but they don't know the Scripture. The worship services they attend are in fact just really good Christian meetings, designed to promote the organisation, and please the hoped for crowd. The aim is just to make sure the music connects and that no one ends up fearing the Lord. Be comfortable, not confronted. Just be sure to come on back. If a rich young ruler happens to walk away sorrowful, we run after him and make another offer that suits him better. My students sometimes get angry because they've been eating the equivalent of tasty discipleship 'junk food' and they realise they have never tasted the 'meat' of the gospel. One of my students said, 'I've not even been brought up on whole milk – it's one per cent skimmed!'

The second response, which often follows the first, is radical repentance. Shove the junk food away! Let us get serious about the Jesus of Scripture, let us let worship actually lead us to be 'undone' like Isaiah and end up with a 'woe is me' so that we can say 'here I am' – and still go even if it ends up like the rest of the sixth chapter of Isaiah: with a ministry that no one listens to, no one gets, and ends up with less than one-tenth of what we started with. With ears to hear and eyes to finally see Matthew 7, they begin to experience what it means to be the few on the hard path that have entered by the narrow gate. There is the good fruit.

There is simply, obedience to the Word that is heard no matter what.

There, Jesus says, is someone I know, someone I recognise. That's the work that truly bears my name. There is the wise one building on the rock. There is wisdom of which the fear of the Lord is the beginning.

Disciples who repent from lives decorated with cheap grace become evangelists who speak the whole truth in love and find the joy of costly grace in following the real Jesus. I'm convinced that today's students are bored with the cheap grace of discipleship as entertainment. The radical gospel of costly grace bids us 'come and die' and that's the narrow way that leads to a life worth losing.