

Bishop John McIntyre



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Home

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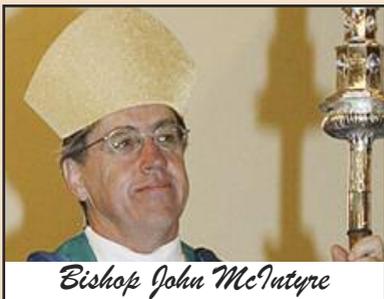
The butterfly is yet another Christian symbol.

The *Caterpillar* reminds us of our life on this earth.

The *cocoon* is a symbol of death cf: the tomb.

The *butterfly* when it breaks free of the cocoon reminds Christians that after death, we break free from this world to have new life in the next.





Bishop John McIntyre

The readings for Lent this year focus on the Gospel of John. This introduction outlines a framework for the study of the Gospel of John based on a contrast between grace and law.

The Gospel of John views the ministry of Jesus as a conflict between him and the religious leaders of his day. This points us to the conflict between two different ways of understanding the religious life. One way is to see religion essentially as a way of life grounded in an encounter with God. This is the way of Jesus. It is true religion. The other way is to see religion essentially as a way of life governed by beliefs and the practices associated with those beliefs. This is the way of the religious leaders. It is mere religiosity.

Grace and Truth

A way of life grounded in an encounter with God is shaped by grace. An encounter with God is an encounter with grace. Grace sums up all that flows from the heart of God in our encounter with God. It is the unmerited, unconditional gift of God's love. Grace sets us free and empowers us to live life to the full.

An encounter with the God of grace opens our eyes to the truth. Truth is a proper grasp of reality. It is about what is real. When we encounter the God of grace we begin to see the world and ourselves as God sees. We begin to see things as they really are. Grace reveals what is true. So the writer of the Gospel of John describes Jesus as "full of grace and truth".

Law and Correctness

A way of life governed by beliefs and practices associated with those beliefs is dominated by law. The right and wrong way of thinking and doing things controls our lives. Law imprisons us in a life constricted by rules and regulations administered by those in positions of power. Being dominated by law makes us put an emphasis on correctness. Correctness, both in thought and action, becomes the measure of a life obligated to law. It is the enemy of truth.

So the writer of the Gospel of John depicts the religious leaders as the masters of law and correctness. They directly oppose Jesus, who is full of grace and truth.

The contrast of grace and truth with law and correctness sets the stage for playing out the compelling drama that is the Gospel of John. Each passage of the Gospel fits into a narrative, aspects of which reflect this ongoing battle between grace and law. An examination of the Gospel in the light of this conflict helps us to understand the nature of the true religion that surpasses mere religiosity.



True Religion

As the followers of Jesus we are called to grow in grace and truth. A faith centred on grace leads us into a true appreciation of the fullness and depth of our humanity and the whole of life in communion with God. It issues in true religion, which binds all humankind and the whole of creation together in common worship. True religion is the fruit of grace. It is divine in origin. It is the gift we have to offer to a world divided by hatred and enmity.

As the drama of the Gospel of John unfolds, true religion is discovered to be inclusive, redemptive, empowering, liberating, nurturing and the source of wisdom. In its practice we are set free to be as we were created by God to be. We are made fully alive in Christ.

Mere Religiosity

Sadly, the opponents of Jesus in the Gospel of John are generally the good religious people of his day. Their religious emphasis on law and correctness leads them into a brand of so-called “truth-telling” that is nothing more than the imposition on others of what is deemed correct by those who happen to hold power. Religion is reduced to an instrument of social control.

Placing a priority on law is necessarily earth-bound. It gives us no capacity to bear witness to the grace that is divine. It is an entirely human construct that leads to mere religiosity. In demanding correctness, it leads to hatred of that which is deemed incorrect, and the demand to be rid of those who

oppose or disagree with us.

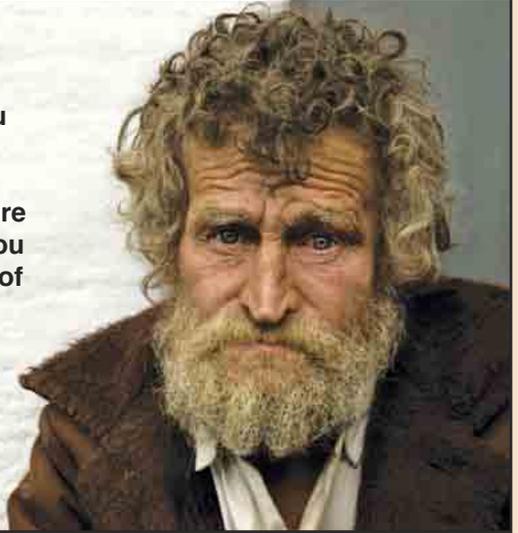
Law give rise to a religiosity that looks for uniformity. It divides and seeks to conquer. In current terms, it is the ground of the fundamentalism that ravages the religions of our day and leads us to war and division.

As the drama of the Gospel of John unfolds, mere religiosity is discovered to be exclusive, condemnatory, disempowering, enslaving, controlling and dogmatic. By its practice we continue to be imprisoned in hatred and conflict. These reflections on the Gospel of John examine some of its passages from the perspective of the drama centred on the struggle between grace and law as we see it unfold in the life of Jesus and those whom he encounters in his ministry. It is my hope and prayer that in so contemplating the Christ, who is full of grace and truth we will be led by grace into some measure of the truth that is healing for the world today.



Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's Grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace.

Jerry Bridges



I know a woman who lives by grace.

When she sees a beggar in the streets, she does not have a discussion with herself about whether it is encouraging wrong behaviour to give to beggars, or whether the beggar will spend the money on the wrong things.

She does not ignore him because he is dirty or smells, or is an embarrassment to the good name of the city in whose streets he sits and begs. She does not wonder what others might think of her if she bothers to stop and take notice of the beggar they seek to ignore or wish would go away. Such thoughts are the thoughts of those who are governed by law and correctness.

What she does is to stop and sit in the gutter with him. She finds out his name and discovers what he might need. It may be nothing more than a toothbrush or a sandwich. Then she goes and buys it for him and sits with him again. She spends time with him and greets him by name when she says him again.

She is entirely unselfconscious about this. She is remarkable because she is growing in grace and truth. In every other way she is probably in most others' eyes entirely unremarkable.

What about you! – Could you have the grace to go out on a limb to help those in need?

Would you be feeling “Well they get welfare etc” And I being conned? Surely they could make an effort to help themselves?

Then put yourself in the shoes of the beggar.



For the next five weeks, we agree to the following commitment as a group.

ATTENDANCE:

To give priority to group meetings.

PARTICIPATION:

To make every effort to participate fully within the group.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

To keep confidential everything that is shared.

ACCOUNTABILITY:

To accept the challenge to reach the goals we have set ourselves.

ACCESSIBILITY:

To give one another the right to call at any time for spiritual help in time of need - even in the middle of the night.

EVANGELISM:

To make an effort to each encourage one person to join this group.



SPECIFICS

We will meet on(Day of week)

We will meet at(Home/Place)

The meeting will begin at..... and close at

We agree to all have left by to not over stay our welcome.

GROUND RULES

Refreshments

Baby Sitting

Newcomers.....

Absence.....

I WILL TRY WITH GOD'S HELP TO BE A REGULAR, FAITHFUL, CARING MEMBER OF THIS GROUP.

Names of Group Members

Phone

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Remember: *While it is best to enjoy these studies from week one, you may like to encourage new people to join the group along the way. This may be a way of introducing them to home groups in the parish.*



Overcoming Temptation

Read Matthew 4.1-11.
Read it simply as a narrative. Do not worry too much about whether you understand any particular part of the narrative or dialogue. Keep going through to the end of the passage without stopping. Then read the comments below.

Setting the Passage in the Context of the Conflict of Grace and Law

It seems a little strange to begin a series of studies focused on the Gospel of John with a study on a passage from the Gospel of Matthew! By tradition, however, the first Sunday in Lent has always focused on the Temptation of Christ. Since there is no account of the temptation in the Gospel of John, this year we are invited to contemplate this passage from the Gospel of Matthew. This study does that by examining the passage from within the framework of the conflict of grace and law.

Certainly the Temptation of Christ is a conflict passage. But does it make sense as a conflict of grace and law? I think we can say “Yes”, if we understand that conflict as a conflict between person-centred graciousness and rule-centred legalism.

While the conflict of Grace and Law is clearly played out in the Gospel of John, it is certainly also a theme well known to the author of the Gospel of Matthew. And it is helpful to understand the Temptation of Christ in the context of that conflict. In this

passage, it is a conflict between the grace-full Jesus, who leads us into all truth, and the devil, who is the author and master of law and correctness.

In this conflict, evil is not so much a stark and obvious opposite to good, but is a subtle distortion of what is good. Evil takes what is good and uses it to wrongful ends. Evil makes law ultimate rather than seeing it as an instrument for good in the service of grace. Evil demands correctness rather than truth. Evil uses law to manipulate and control. It opposes the grace which sets people free to be as God would have them be. Evil takes what is of God and reduces it to what is merely earth-bound. In the devil’s hands law becomes a weapon with which to attack Jesus. “It is Written” on the Lips of Jesus. There is a consistent theme to the three responses Jesus makes to the devil. Each time he goes back to what is written in the “Law and the Prophets”. Truth emerges for Jesus from what is written in the scripture as it is interpreted by grace.

In grace, scripture for Jesus comes from the heart of God as gift, in unmerited, unconditional love. Fullness of life is known in so much more than that which meets only our physical needs. Only in deep communion with a gracious God who comes to us in love will we know what it means to be fully human. Only as we are encountered by the God who in love created us will we come to understand meaning and purpose in life. “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’”.



A true encounter with the living God is not about exploiting our relationship with God. It is not about what we can demand of God in our extremity, as though God were there merely for our benefit. A true encounter with God issues in a life shaped by the same grace with which we were met by God. This will shine through in the manner in which we relate to God and to each other. Grace does not test out our relationships with the other to see what the other might do for us. Grace looks to what we might do for the other. “It is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’”.

If Grace is at the centre of our life, shaping who we are and how we live, our concerns will not be for what we may gain, or how we will be seen, or whether we will have power. Our concern will be only to place God and the grace of God at the very centre of our lives. This is true worship.

“It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him’”.

“It is Written” from the Mouth of the Devil

The devil can quote scripture too. “It is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you’”. In the mouth of the devil, however, what is from God is turned only to earth-bound and selfish ends. Temptation does not come from what is starkly and obviously opposite to God. It uses what is from God to the wrong ends. When scripture is construed as law rather than understood in grace, its words are stripped of their life and meaning.

The devil tempts Jesus to make ultimate what is not ultimate. The devil suggests that Jesus see life and ministry merely from an earthly point of view. Food, survival, manipulation and recognition are made all-important. Each temptation in turn invites Jesus to reduce both his own life and the lives of those to whom he ministers to what is important only from an earthly point of view. If Jesus reduces his ministry to meeting people’s earthly needs he would succeed in gaining power and control in the human arena. The form of religion would be there but it would be empty of life.

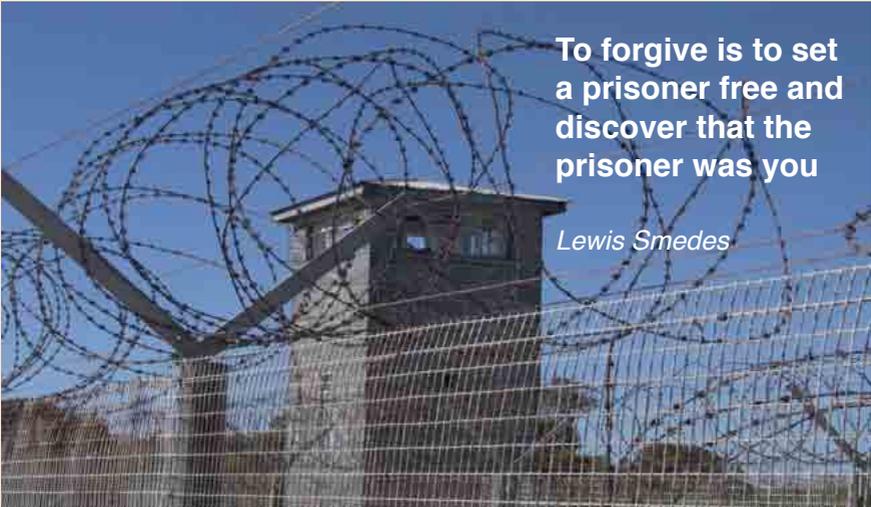
The devil’s argument has a certain appeal. Surely it is good for Jesus to meet his own and others’ earthly needs, and surely there is nothing wrong in using his power to do that. Surely it is alright to use spectacular displays of power to draw others to his way. Surely the end justifies the means. In the grip of law, religion becomes a useful mechanism of social control but it is devoid of life.

Now Read through the whole passage again and see if it makes sense in the light of these comments.

Write down any questions or comments you may have for when you meet with your group to discuss this passage.

Consider the questions under ‘contemplate’ on Page 13





To forgive is to set
a prisoner free and
discover that the
prisoner was you

Lewis Smedes

When Nelson Mandela came into power as President of South Africa, he refused to use his power against his former enemies. He stood courageously against his fellow leaders in the African National Congress (ANC) to do this. Against their demands, he insisted the new national anthem include both the inspirational African anthem and the former Afrikaans anthem. He refused to demand the national rugby side, “The Springboks”, change its name and uniform, even though they were symbols of oppression to Africans. He famously inspired The Springboks to victory in the Rugby World Cup. He employed as part of his personal bodyguard former Afrikaans security officers, men who had oppressed him and his people. He invited his former gaoler to his inauguration as President. By choosing this Christlike grace in leadership and the exercise of power, he won over his former enemies and avoided a potential armed uprising by them. By rejecting the demands of the ANC to abide by their notions of correct behaviour, he enabled a new reign of peace in his broken country.

What about you! – Could you have the grace to forgive those who oppressed you? Put yourself in the shoes of Nelson Mandela



Welcome!

Introduction and Welcome.



Opening Prayer.

God of Grace, from Jesus we learn that temptation is overcome only in reliance on your word of grace: give us hearts and minds that are open to hear your word and to act with grace in all we do. Amen.



Connecting.

Consider the story and questions on page 10. (15 minutes)

Reading. (10 minutes)

Read **Matthew 4: 1 - 11**

Read aloud the whole passage.

As an alternative it may be helpful for different readers to take parts as the narrator and the key actors in the narrative.



Reader 1 ¹The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert, so that the devil could test him. After Jesus had gone without eating for forty days and nights, he was very hungry. Then the devil came to him and said,

Reader 2 “If you are God’s Son, tell these stones to turn into bread.”

Reader 1 ⁴Jesus answered,

Reader 3 “The Scriptures say: ‘No one can live only on food. People need every word that God has spoken.’”

Reader 1 ⁵Next, the devil took Jesus to the holy city and had him stand on the highest part of the temple. ⁶The devil said,

Reader 2 “If you are God’s Son, jump off. The Scriptures say: ‘God will give his angels orders about you. They will catch you in their arms, and you won’t hurt your feet on the stones.’”

Reader 1 ⁷Jesus answered,

Reader 3 “The Scriptures also say, ‘Don’t try to test the Lord your God!’”

Reader 1 ⁸Finally, the devil took Jesus up on a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms on earth and their power. ⁹The devil said to him,



Reader 2 “I will give all this to you, if you will bow down and worship me.”

Reader 1 ¹⁰Jesus answered,

Reader 3 “Go away Satan! The Scriptures say: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’”

Reader 1 ¹¹Then the devil left Jesus, and angels came to help him

Review your preparation notes and discuss any questions they may have raised.



Questions for reflection and discussion.

Look at verses 1-4

- Is there anything wrong with Jesus using his power to overcome hunger? Offer your comments.
- How is the response of Jesus an answer to this temptation?

Look at verses 5-7

- What is this temptation really about?
- What is the difference between putting God to the test and rightly relying on God in difficult situations?
- Have you ever tested God – Comment on your experiences

Look at verses 8-11

- What does this tell you about what it means to worship the devil?
- How does the response of Jesus give any clues about what is the true worship of God?

Finally

Is it helpful to see this conflict story as a conflict between grace and law?
Comment on your reasons

If there is something you have discovered in this discussion that helps you better to understand your life of faith, share it with the group.



Closing prayers

God of Grace, we acknowledge that too often we turn away from your word of grace and go in our own way: forgive us for those times we fall into temptation, and by your grace, strengthen our wills to seek out and go in the way of Jesus. Amen.





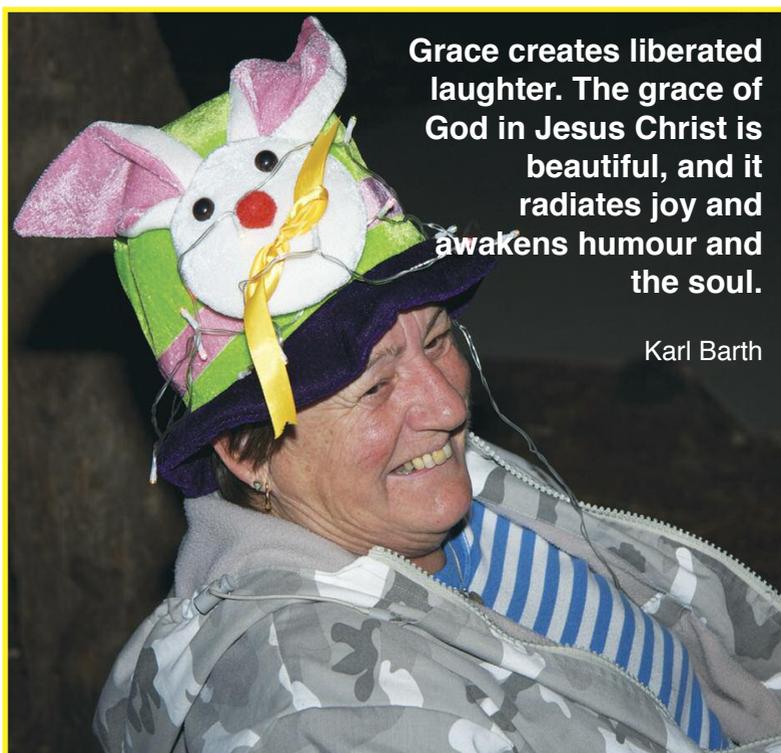
Refreshments and Fellowship.



Contemplate:

Spend some time in reflection on your own life and understanding of what it means to be godly.

Consider times when you are tempted to push yourself and your ideas on others rather than to wait and listen for what a more grace-filled understanding of godliness would require of you?



Grace creates liberated laughter. The grace of God in Jesus Christ is beautiful, and it radiates joy and awakens humour and the soul.

Karl Barth

