

# Back to Grace ~ How to Counsel without Turning Your Counsees into Pharisees

Grace Fellowship Church / Pastor Brad Bigney

## I. WHAT Are We Talking About when we Say ‘Performance Trap’?

When you’re in the performance trap you start defining yourself in terms of your own performance in the Christian life... basically trying to be your own ‘Redeemer.’

## II. Why is it So PREVALENT Among Christians?

### A. The Majority of Your Counsees will Arrive Still TALKING about Grace but No Longer GRIPPED by it

“In many churches, the atmosphere is more funeral than celebratory, more routine than startling, more weary than playful. What accounts for such dullness?

It happens when we defend ourselves against grace. We have a natural resistance to it... we don't like the disorientation it causes. So we tame it, enshrining it in dusty creeds and sentimental hymns, thus draining it of meaning. That's how Christianity came to be a safe religion, a kind of halfway house where we get a dose of spirituality to make us nice people and help us be more successful in the world... How do we recover a sense of astonishment? By telling the Story, again and again, to ourselves, to one another, to the whole world; by announcing the good news without moderation and dilution, in all its wonder.” *If Grace Is So Amazing, Why Don't We Like It?*, Donald McCullough, p. 228-229

### B. Your Counsees are More Informed by the CULTURE than Scripture

We’re inundated with slogans like:

"There's no free lunch."

"You get what you deserve."

"No pain. No gain."

"God helps those who help themselves."

"At Smith Barney we make money the old-fashioned way - We EEEEEEEARN it!"

## III. How Do You Help Someone SEE that they’re CAUGHT in the Performance Trap?

### A. Ask Good QUESTIONS

- Are you guilty of perfectionistic STANDARDS for yourself? And often for others around you?
- Are you overly CRITICAL and judgmental – both of yourself and those around you?
- Are you morbidly INTROSPECTIVE and do you comb over your life with microscopic detail?
- Are you more focused on YOUR standard than God’s standard?

### **B. Find out What They do with SIN**

Bottom line: you need to help your counselee develop a Christian WORLDVIEW that has some place for the sins of true saints – both their own... and others around them.

That’s what Paul was talking about in **Romans chapter 7:14-25**

#### **Three critical questions to work through with them...**

1. Are you willing to **recognize** that you will still sin?
2. Do you know what to **do** and what to **think** when you sin?
3. Do you know where to **run** when you do sin?

There is a hopelessness that comes from **REJECTING** all of God's standards - and saying, “Ah! I can just go out and sin all I want!”... but there’s also a hopelessness that comes from having a perfectionistic **SELF - MADE** standard that doesn't allow any place in a real life for the sins of true saints.

### **C. Show them how PRIDE and Performance Feed Each Other**

**Oswald Chambers** cautioned us when he said: ‘I am called to live in perfect relation to God so that my life produces a longing after God in other lives, not admiration for myself. Thoughts about myself hinder my usefulness to God. God is not after perfecting me to be a specimen in His showroom; He is getting me to the place where He can use me.’” Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (1935; reprint, Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour, 1963), 251.

People guilty of living this way have way too **high** of an opinion of themselves. Pride is a huge factor with the perfectionistic- performance-driven person. They’re so **devastated** that they’ve fallen short because they think so highly of themselves.

#### IV. How Can You Help Someone **BREAK** Free from the Performance Trap?

##### A. Point it Out Wherever You See Your Counselee Turning their Spiritual Disciplines into Raw **REGULATIONS** Instead of a Living **RELATIONSHIP** with Christ

I Timothy 4:7 "... discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness."

- |                 |                        |           |
|-----------------|------------------------|-----------|
| - Bible reading | - Silence and Solitude | - Serving |
| - Prayer        | - Journaling           | - Etc.    |
| - Worship       | - Evangelism           |           |
| - Fasting       | - Giving               |           |

As your counselee talks about their relationship with God see if it sounds like they're getting a **DAILY** performance **REVIEW** from God on their spiritual disciplines.

Listen to see if they're confusing **REGULATIONS** with **RELATIONSHIP!**

**2 Corinthians 11:3** "But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ."

##### B. Take Time to **TEACH** them How the Biblical Doctrine of **GRACE** Applies to Justification and Sanctification

###### 1. Saving Grace (Justification) ~ God's unmerited favor bestowed on undeserving sinners

**Ephesians 2:8-9** "For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works so that no one can boast."

**Romans 3:23-24** "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

**Romans 5:1-2** "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we also have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

**2 Timothy 1:9** "Who saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of His own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time."

###### 2. Living Grace (Sanctification) ~ The desire and the power to do God's will

**Titus 2:11** talks about that kind of grace..."For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age..."

**2 Corinthians 9:8** "God is able to make all grace abound to you so that... you will abound in every good work"

**2 Peter 3:18** "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"

**Acts 13:43** "...Paul and Barnabas... speaking to the new believers at Antioch, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God."

- Get your counselee reading and meditating on some Puritan prayers
- Assign prayers from the *Valley of Vision*

### The Dark Guest

O Lord,

Bend my hands and cut them off,  
For I have often struck thee with a wayward will,  
When these fingers should embrace thee by faith.

I am not yet weaned from all created glory,  
Honor, wisdom, and esteem of others,  
For I have a secret motive to eye my name in all I do.

Let me not only speak the word sin,  
but see the thing itself.  
Give me to view a discovered sinfulness,  
To know that though my sins are crucified  
They are never wholly mortified.

Hatred, malice, ill-will,  
Vain-glory that hungers for and hunts  
after man's approval and applause,  
All are crucified, forgiven,  
But they rise again in my sinful heart.

O my crucified but never wholly mortified sinfulness!  
O my life-long damage and daily shame!

O my indwelling and besetting sins!  
O the tormenting slavery of a sinful heart!

Destroy, O God, the dark guest within  
Whose hidden presence makes my life a hell.

Yet thou hast not left me here without grace;  
The cross still stands and meets my needs  
In the deepest straits of the soul.

...The memory of my great sins, my many  
temptations, my falls,  
Bring afresh into my mind the remembrance of thy  
great help,  
of thy support from heaven,  
of the great grace that saved such a wretch as I am.

There is no treasure so wonderful  
As that continuous experience of thy grace  
toward me which alone can subdue  
the risings of sin within:

Give me more of it.

*The Valley of Vision pp 126-127*

"Transformation is always grace. We sometimes think that although we're 'saved by grace,' we're supposed to change by effort. Either that, or people become passive. One of the analogies that's been helpful to me is the difference between a motorboat, a raft, and a sailboat. In a motorboat I'm in charge. I determine how fast we're going to go, and in what direction. Some people approach spiritual life that way. If I'm just aggressive enough, if I have enough quiet times, I can make

transformation happen on my own. Usually that results in people becoming legalistic, then pride starts to creep in, and things get all messed up.

Some people have been burned by that kind of approach. So they go to the opposite extreme and will say, 'I'm into grace.' It's like they're floating on a raft. If you ask them to do anything to further their growth, they'll say, 'Hey, no. I'm not into works. I'm into grace. You're getting legalistic with me.' It's the whole "let go and Let God" thing. So they drift.

On a sailboat, however, I don't move if it's not for the wind. My only hope of movement is the wind. I can't control the wind. I don't manufacture the wind. Jesus talks about the Spirit blowing like the wind. But there is a role for me to play, and part of it has to do with what I need to discern. A good sailor will discern, where's the wind at work? How should I set the sails? Spiritual formation is like sailing." John Ortberg, "Holy Tension" interview in "Leadership Journal" , Winter 2004

### C. Get Your Counselee to Stop READING & Start SOAKING in the Scriptures as if They're Reading Them for the Very First Time

1. Ask them to get a brand new / clean Bible and read it
2. Ask them to read Galatians slowly... and carefully... and prayerfully  
(See George Mueller – how to prayerfully read Scripture)
3. Ask them to Hebrews slowly... and carefully... and prayerfully

**Galatians 3:3** "Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?"

**Galatians 2:19-21** "For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."

### D. Help Your Counselee to See They've Left Their SAVIOR Behind!

"God never intended that we relate to Him directly. Our own performance is never good enough to be acceptable to Him. The only way we can relate to God is through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. It is only the blood of Jesus that will cleanse us from a guilty conscience and give us the confidence to enter into the presence of God." *The Discipline of Grace*, Jerry Bridges, p. 22

**I Timothy 2:5** "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus."

**John 15:5** "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

**Hebrews 12: 2** “Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...”

Biblical principles divorced from the **SAVIOR** of those principles will not produce the **RESULTS** we're looking for.

**Philippians 3:3-8-9** “For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh... <sup>8</sup> Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith”

“I didn’t want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ – God’s righteousness.” *The Message*

## Conclusion:

Two verses in my all-time favorite hymn keep us focused on the main thing... “It is Well”...

v. 2 Though Satan should buffet, tho’ trials should come, let this blessed assurance control, that Christ has regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed His own blood for my soul

v. 3 My sin – O the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin – not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul”

## Recommended Reading

*Think Again: Relief from the Burden of Introspection*, Jared Mellinger, 2017

*Good News for Those Trying Harder*, Alan Kraft, 2008

*The Cross-Centered Life: Keeping the Gospel the Main Thing*, C.J. Mahaney, 2002

*Breathing Grace: What You Need More than Your Next Breath*, Harry Kraus, 2007

*Surprised by Jesus: Subversive Grace in the Four Gospels*, Dane Ortlund, 2022

## Don't Leave Home Without Him!

Refuse to Leave Your Savior Behind!

I know that might sound basic but I have to say it! Why? Because it's our nature to try and boil everything down to just a few principles. We want some kind of 'System' or 'Check-list' that we can work in our own strength to live this Christian life... but God won't give us one! He didn't design the Christian life to work that way. We actually do need Him!

But people keep trying to live the good life instead of the God life... and it won't work... not for long... and it wears you out. Another description of it, or label for it would be 'Exhausted Christian Living.'

**John 15:5** tell us "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

- In what way(s) have you been guilty of trying to live the Christian life without Him?
- When are you most guilty of forgetting Him and leaving Him behind... even in the midst of your spiritual disciplines (like Bible reading or Scripture memory, etc.)

Mark it Down! Biblical principles divorced from the God of those principles will not produce the results we're looking for. And you can knock yourself out in the flesh... and work, work, work, work, work but it won't make up for the absence of God in your life.

**Wayne Brown** describes the problem this way...

"I am similarly convinced that trust in the security of Christian principles is being confused with faith in God. Rather than engage a faith that requires, well, a little too much faith (not to mention the inherent wrestling), we find safe harbor in the surrogate stability of Right Christian Living. To allow God's uncontrollable ways to work their power in our lives is so much more refreshing and inspiring and, yes, less predictable. This is the way of faith, which is the very heart of the Christian's journey.

In the guise of good stewardship and sound thinking, our faith is fashioning for itself a well-oiled hamster wheel. Though secure and productive (it spins well), the contraption leaves little to the imagination. Granted, for the harried traveler nothing is more calming than the hum of a spinning wheel. But nothing is more numbing.

To let go is to lose control, to be eaten alive, and that is not acceptable. But let me state it clearly: the impulse to control - to get it all lined up - is often a manifestation of fear, not faith.

We might pump up the principles and send them floating overhead like the Goodyear blimp with the words Right Christian Living branded bold and tall on its shimmering skin. But the fiery sparks of real life always bring it back to earth, sometimes in a nose dive, Hindenburg fashion. The beguiled Christians falling from the spiritual dirigible as it tilts, groans, and bursts into flames, often land on my couch. ‘Why didn't it work?’ they ask. ‘Right Christian Living was supposed to keep me aloft...freed from my childhood hurt, rising above my bent toward sin, successful in my marriage and employment.’ I usually wait a few sessions before suggesting that perhaps the ship's pilot was someone other than God.

It didn't work, I then tell them, because principles - Christian or not - will always fail you. At some point, your ‘decency’ will spring a leak; your ‘good parenting’ will buckle under the weight of human frailty; the shocking crack in your ‘best intentions’ will reveal a darker motive. You have been looking to these things to save you, not guide you, I say. Sometimes they understand this, and sometimes they don't. And sometimes they ask for a book on how to get the blimp up and running again.” *Water from Stone*, M. Wayne Brown, pp. 103, 104 & 105

- Has your ‘blimp’ of ‘right Christian living’ crashed yet? What were (are) the circumstances that brought it about?
  
- What do you think God wants you to learn / understand about this?
  
- What changes do you need to make in your thinking and actions to avoid living this way in the future?
  
- When are you most tempted to try and get the ‘blimp’ back up in the air again?



## Are You a Numb Christian?

If you stop living by grace you'll morph into something radically different than a joyful, Spirit-filled Christ-follower.

The numb Christian is numb from relentlessly striving on the treadmill of 'If I don't keep doing all this Christian stuff without stumbling God won't love me.'

**Wayne Brown** describes it this way...

"The numb Christian is numb, not because he doesn't know what to do, but because he has done and done until he feels completely undone. Believing that he must either get on board with the industrious perfecting of his faith or resign himself to the fact that he just doesn't have what it takes to dance the industrious dance, he becomes either disheartened or cynical. Hanging his weary head, or perhaps steeling his cynical jaw, he goes through the agonizing motions of faith. With faith's imaginative nerve effectively severed, he lives a half-throttle life.

All said, the truly passionate person is fully alive-here, now. She greets each day with the abundant, unedited joy, pain, and intrigue of her existence.

In contrast, both industrious and numb Christians seem far too distracted with straining to get to a place where they are not than with being fully present in the place where they are, more concerned with producing for and getting from God than with laying bare the chambers of their hearts." *Water from Stone*, M.

Wayne Brown, Page 32 & 33

- In what ways have you been living a half-throttle life?
  
- How do you think this half-throttle lifestyle has played into your pattern of turning again and again to sin and despair?
  
- In what way(s) do you think you've lost sight of grace?
  
- How well do you think you've understood the role of grace for your daily Christian life? Describe your understanding of what role God's grace plays in our daily Christian living?

## **George Mueller's Secret to Spiritual Power – How to Prayerfully Read through Scripture**

Before this time my practice had been, at least for ten years previously, as an habitual thing, to give myself to prayer after having dressed in the morning. Now, I saw that the most important thing was to give myself to the reading of God's Word, and to meditation on it, that thus my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, reprov'd, instructed; and that thus, by means of the Word of God, whilst meditating on it, my heart might be brought into experimental communion with the Lord.

I began therefore to meditate on the New Testament from the beginning, early in the morning. The first thing I did, after having asked in a few words of the Lord's blessing upon His precious Word, was to begin to meditate on the Word of God, searching as it were into every verse to get blessing out of it; not for the sake of the public ministry of the Word, not for the sake of preaching on what I had meditated upon, but for the sake of obtaining food for my own soul.

The result I have found to be almost invariably this, that after a few minutes my soul has been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication; so that, though I did not, as it were, give myself to prayer, but to meditation, yet it turned almost immediately more or less to prayer. When thus I have been for a while making confession or intercession or supplication, or have given thanks, I go on to the next words or verse, turning all, as I go on, into prayer for myself or others, as the Word may lead to it, but still continually keeping before me that food for my own soul is the object of my meditation. The result of this is that there is always a good deal of confession, thanksgiving, supplication, or intercession mingled with my meditation, and that my inner man almost invariably is even sensibly nourished and strengthened, and that by breakfast time, with rare exceptions, I am in a peaceful if not happy state of heart.

The difference, then, between my former practice and my present on is this: formerly, when I rose, I began to pray as soon as possible, and generally spent all my time till breakfast in prayer, or almost all the time. At all events I almost invariably began with prayer.... But what was the result? I often spent a quarter of an hour, or half an hour, or even an hour on my knees before being conscious to myself of having derived comfort, encouragement, humbling of soul, etc.; and often, after having suffered much from wander of mind for the first ten minutes, or quarter of an hour, or even half an hour, I only then really began to pray.

I scarcely ever suffer now in this way. For my heart being nourished by the truth, being brought into experimental fellowship with God, I speak to my Father and to my Friend (vile though I am, and unworthy of it) about the things that He has brought before me in His precious Word. If often now

astonishes me that I did not sooner see this point.... And yet now, since God has taught me this point, it is as plain to me as anything that the first thing the child of God has to do morning by morning is to obtain food for his inner man.

Now what is food for the inner man? Not prayer, but the Word of God; and here again, not the simple reading of the Word of God, so that it only passes through our minds, just as water passes through a pipe, but considering what we read, pondering over it and applying it to our hearts.

When we pray we speak to God. Now prayer, in order to be continued for any length of time in any other than a formal manner, requires, generally speaking, a measure of strength or godly desire, and the season therefore when this exercise of the soul can be most effectually performed is after the inner man has been nourished by meditation on the Word of God, where we find our Father speaking to us, to encourage us, to comfort us, to instruct us, to humble us, to reprove us. We may therefore profitably meditate with God's blessing though we are ever so weak spiritually; nay, the weaker we are, the more we need meditation for the strengthening of our inner man. Thus there is far less to be feared from wandering of mind than if we give ourselves to prayer without having had time previously for meditation.

I dwell so particularly on this point because of the immense spiritual profit and refreshment I am conscious of having derived from it myself, and I affectionately and solemnly beseech all my fellow believers to ponder this matter. By the blessing of God, I ascribe to this mode the help and strength which I have had from God to pass in peace through deeper trials, in various ways, than I have ever had before; and having now above fourteen years tried this way, I can most fully, in the fear of God, commend it.

Taken from *Spiritual Secrets of George Muller*, © 1985 by Roger Steer. American rights granted by Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60189. Pages 60-62.

Quoted in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, © 1991 by Donald S. Whitney. NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 80935. Pages 70-72. [www.BiblicalSpirituality.org](http://www.BiblicalSpirituality.org).