

COMPLETE THE CIRCLE

When Jesus Sets Conditions on Grace | Luke 6:37-42

The Gospel According to Bono

In his book, *Bono in Conversation*, author Michka Assayas recounts a remarkable discussion he had with the lead singer and songwriter of the mega-star rock group, U2.¹ While Bono's salty language and liberal social views are understandably objectionable to some, it remains a fact that U2 began as a Christian fellowship and still plumbs important biblical themes in many of their chart-busting songs.

Mr. Assayas, who is not a Christ-follower himself, began by asking the pop star: **"Don't you think appalling things happen when people become too religious?"** Bono acknowledged that there were certainly risks there, but then countered by saying something fascinating: *"It's a mind-blowing concept [to me] that the God who created the Universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people... but the thing that keeps me on my knees is the difference between Grace and Karma."*

"What do you mean?" Assayas asked. Well, said Bono, *"At the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics -- in physical laws-- every action is met by an equal or an opposite one... And yet, along comes... Grace to upend all that... Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. **I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge,**" says Bono. *"It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity... Christ took on the sins of the world,"* Bono continued, **"so that what we put out did not come back to us, so that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. It's not our own good works that get us through the gates of Heaven."** It's God's amazing grace given to us in the name of love.*

Our Act and Christ's

I'm not sure there's any more precious and distinctive belief held by followers of Jesus than this truth described in the Gospel According to Bono. "It is simply impossible to hold an accurate understanding of the utterly holy character of God as the Bible describes Him and think for a single moment: *"When I meet God face-to-face one day, I think He is going to be really impressed by my character. I reckon He'll take a gander at all my moral merit badges -- my church attendance, my charitable gifts, my community service and voting record and say, 'Wow, this guy, Dan Meyer, is really going to improve the quality of fellowship here in heaven. Let's definitely advance him to the next round.'"*

How many of you have ever watched a tone-deaf contestant come before the judges on American Idol or the Voice -- all impressed by his own costume and performance -- only to hear the evaluation of a real singing star? It's not pretty, is it? That scenario, however, barely hints at what would happen to someone who came smugly before the judgment seat of God. God is a being who lives eternally at such a perfectly pure and holy pitch that the performance of even our best moral rock stars looks like a polyester lounge act in comparison. The Bible tells us that God is a being whose goodness burns so brilliantly clean and hot that, *unfiltered by grace*, it would instantly incinerate anything stained in the slightest by sin – no matter how sequined the outside looked.

This was a hard concept for some of the religious people in Jesus' time to take in. The Pharisees, for example, saw themselves as serious contenders on the Israelite Idol show. They were costumed in pristine robes, untainted by close contact with the people they called "sinners." They spent hours and years do-re-me-ing their way up and down the scales of ritual purity and religious observance. They were convinced God would be seriously impressed by their performance. And then the Great Rock and Star of Eternity himself came crashing down to earth and gonged their act. No wonder they crucified Him.

We know better now, don't we? We understand with Bono that we're neither rocks nor stars in the most important sense. We know with the apostle Peter that we are people made of shifting sand (Mark 14:72). We know with the prophet Isaiah that we are people of unclean lips (Isa 6:5). We know with St. Paul that we fall far short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). We know that we get to spend eternity in heaven not because we're such great singers, but because Jesus is -- because in the finals of the great contest with sin and death on Calvary, Jesus chose to enwrap us in the most remarkable song: "*Don't make them pay for their tone-deafness, Father,*" Jesus sang, even as the crowd spat at him across the judgment table. "*Let me pay instead. Let me pay the price here and now.*" **Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34).**

The Condition of Grace

In a sense, I suppose, you and I are like bar-room brawlers suddenly given the chance to become accompanying musicians for the ultimate Star. Suddenly, we find ourselves offered a free pass into the Great Concert that roars with such splendor and majesty in the massive hall of the Kingdom of God. If we have accepted that pass, we are eager to use every instrument we can lay our hands on to play the Master's song. If we have accepted that pass, we are raising our hands and throwing our arms around everyone we can reach. If we have accepted the pass that Jesus freely offers, we are singing beneath our breath, wherever we go: "***Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.***"

But here's the part that could get a man killed. It's the part so disturbing, so upsetting to some hearers, that it made plenty of people want to see Jesus dead: ***There is a condition on God's grace.*** Please listen to me carefully here because it is going to run hard up against the way many of us have come to view things. Make no mistake: The **LOVE** of God is unconditional. His heart to meet us where we are today, to redeem and bless us, is unconditional. We don't merit it. We don't earn it. We can only gratefully receive it, because LOVE is who God is and what God does (1 Jhn 4).

But **GRACE** is something different. Somebody once told me that GRACE is **God's Riches At Christ's Expense**. Grace is having our sins forgiven and being offered a ticket into God's Great Concert, not because of my goodness but because of Christ's and his willingness to pay the price for that pass upon the cross. In its fullest sense, however, grace is more than that. Grace is life IN and AT God's concert. It's not just getting a ticket. It's taking your seat at or dancing in the mosh pit of God's kingdom. God's intention is that you I live in a "state of grace" and entering that state is conditional. That is to say, it requires something of you and of me.

When I think of someone who lived in a state of grace, I often picture Vickie Bare, the amazing Children's Ministry Director of Christ Church, until we lost her from this earth in her early forties. In her journey with cancer, Vickie (always smart) became very wise. At one point she wrote this: *"Grace is like being offered a heart transplant free of charge. Until we accept the heart, however, and allow the surgeon to cut us and implant the new heart into us -- until we undergo that operation, the heart can't pump its life giving blood through our body. The reality is that we don't just need a ticket to heaven, we need a heart transplant now."*

Dallas Willard says that many people have tended to see religion as all about getting a ticket to heaven when we die. That's important, Dallas says; you certainly want to attend to that! But Grace in the sense Jesus taught it is so much more than this. It's more than having God scan the barcode on the back of our Jesus ticket. Grace isn't just the way into the Kingdom of God someday; it is the truth and way and life of that Kingdom we start walking in TODAY. Grace is God acting supernaturally in us. It is God joining us with his Concert, moving us to his music, giving us a song to sing and instruments to play with one another. Grace isn't a stub we hold. It is a circle we participate in. Grace is life on the Kingdom side of the fence.

Completing the Circle

This is what Jesus meant when he said: **Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you (Luke 6:37-38).** In other words, Jesus is saying that grace always moves in a circle. If you really know that you've been freed by God from judgment and condemnation, you will not judge and condemn others. If you've truly accepted the huge forgiveness God has offered you, you are going to

forgive others their sins. If you're genuinely conscious of all you've been given by God, then you are going to be a generous giver.

Unless you've just gotten really good at faking the Jesus Life. Have any of you watched the music game show, *I CAN SEE YOUR VOICE*?² I've been fascinated by this show. The object of the game is to discern who on the stage is really singing that beautiful song and who is just lip-syncing it. Some people are so good at faking the song that you can't tell that the music actually isn't in them.

GOD CAN SEE WHAT'S INSIDE US. He know we are not perfect. We're not the Rock Star. We don't sing the song or play the instruments exactly like Jesus does yet. But if we are not at least stirred by the music to the point that we are starting to pursue reconciliation in our relationships... starting to forgive the people who have hurt or failed us... starting to turn away from the criticizing, condemning way of the world... If we're not authentically moving not just our lips but the lungs of our life to Christ's amazing Grace Song, then maybe we haven't yet entered the circle. Perhaps we haven't yet gone in to the Kingdom Concert. Maybe we're still sitting on the other side of the fence. As the great reformers, John Calvin and Martin Luther each put it: *"While it is true that we are saved not by works but by faith alone, the faith that saves is never alone."*³

This is why Jesus said, in effect, to the Pharisees and by extension to you and me: "Don't you folks understand that the love of God is always aimed at completing the circle of grace? Why do you stop it up? How can you let grace go to you and no further? **Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say... "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? (Luke 6:41-42)** Do you honestly expect God's grace, when you won't extend it to others? Repent, I tell you! Change your course! **For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you (Luke 6:38).**

What do YOU do with a message and Messiah like that? I'll tell you what I do: I start to think, *"I have got to walk further into this Concert. I've got to examine my circles. I've got to stop lip-syncing the gospel message and really start living it. I've got to change the way I've been doing some of my relationships, root myself more in some Kingdom disciplines, and let the Maestro and his music move more and more through me."* And then I think: *"But maybe it would be easier to just CRUCIFY Jesus. After all, I've got my free pass."* How about you?

¹ From an article by Gene Edward Veith, *World Magazine*, August 01, 2005.

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Can_See_Your_Voice_\(American_TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Can_See_Your_Voice_(American_TV_series))

³ <https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/42366/is-luther-really-the-originator-of-we-are-saved-by-faith-alone-but-the-faith-t>