



WHEN STRIVINGS CEASE



REPLACING THE GOSPEL OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT WITH
THE GOSPEL OF LIFE-TRANSFORMING GRACE

RUTH CHOU SIMONS



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When Strivings Cease

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*To the GraceLaced community, past and present:
These hard-won truths have shaped every word I write and
every stroke I paint. I can't wait for Grace to amaze you too.*



Buddha's Final Words: Strive unceasingly.

Jesus' Final Words: It is finished.

—TIM KELLER

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Introduction



We're Missing Something (*Why We're So Tired. Why We Strive.*)

All this trying leads up to the vital moment at which you turn to God and say, "You must do this. I can't."

—C. S. LEWIS, *MERE CHRISTIANITY*



wish we were sitting down over a cup of coffee, face-to-face, close enough for you to see my chipped nail polish and ungroomed eyebrows (yes, I'm writing you from the middle of 2020's COVID-19 outbreak), or the way I mess with my cuticles when I'm really focused and forming my thoughts—close enough for me to ask you an honest question that's changed everything in my adult life:

If we believe Jesus is all we need, then why do we live our days

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worn out, fearful, and anxiously striving as if we are lacking and unable to measure up?

- *As if we are lacking*—lacking resources, time, achievement, clarity, purpose, energy, confidence . . . or acceptance and welcome from a holy God.
- *As if we are unable to measure up*—as friends, at work, as mothers, as wives, for our parents, with our appearance, in our current season of life . . . as Christ followers.


I don't know about you, but 2020's unexpected worldwide pandemic revealed some things in my life I conveniently overlook sometimes when everything is "normal." After the initial novelty of staying home, playing board games, and baking with family wore off, the pressure to perform set in. Suddenly, I felt the intense pressure to *carpe diem* my way through the unfamiliar circumstances, to use this extra time at home to the fullest. I don't know where I thought the expectations were coming from, but I heard them play out in my head: *Learn a language! Create a YouTube channel with helpful content! Set up the most inspiring homeschool environment! Inspire your community and employees! Lead! Set the example! Reorganize your life! Finish home projects!*

I expected maximum productivity and creativity from myself, all while navigating loss, isolation, sadness, stress eating, and perpetual low-grade fear and worry.

Was it just me? Did you notice how easy it was to default to striving our way to assurance and comfort when we felt so much fear and lack of control? Did you notice how shaky we felt about our place in the world when the expectations for social and professional engagement, and productivity, all changed in a moment?



If we believe
Jesus is all
we need, then why
do we live our days
worn out, fearful, and
anxiously striving
as if we are
lacking ^{and} unable
to measure up?



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The dependencies, routines, and dare I say, idols that were uncovered in my life during this chaotic start to a new decade helped me see how not circumstantial some of my responses were—and that how we seek to fix ourselves reveals what we really believe we need. This plays out even in the books we read and who we listen to for counsel.

An unprecedented number of Christian self-help books populate the current bestsellers lists, and if we were to judge our generation by the covers that line our shelves, we'd gather that, while women have unhindered opportunities for self-made success, empowerment, and freedom to break molds in this generation, we are also more anxious, overwhelmed, and weighed down than ever.

For some of us, these feelings can seem like the soundtrack playing in the background of our daily lives, and sometimes we sing along, asking those anxious questions: What does it take to not miss my purpose? To not miss my potential? To meet expectations? To not waste my life? What does it take to feel like I've done enough? What must I do to *be* enough?

I may not admit it out loud, but so often I'm looking for a formula that ensures my "arrival." I want the fix for the fear of not getting it right. I want to know what I can do to make sure I hit the mark. Is it just me? I don't think so.


The reason our bookshelves look the way they do is that we are all constantly hoping to find our purposes, discover our places in the world, and make peace with what we ourselves, and others, expect of us. These aren't necessarily bad goals—some might even call them good—but why are they leading to so much weariness and uncertainty when the formulas promise the exact opposite?

If someone offers you a prescription for what ails you, but the prescription leaves your condition unchanged, it usually means that something is not quite right about either the prescription or the diagnosis. If what we really need in order to stop feeling so worn out and pressed to perform at a certain standard is a better strategy, then why are the prescriptions not working? We continue reaching for formulas for success, strategies for life direction, or feel-good pep talks that we think must certainly be the fix for our feelings of inadequacy. And I get it. I mean, I'd love to be writing a book of life lessons you could emulate and run with, stories that immediately empower you to *do something*. Because that's what feels right in this culture of hustle. But here's the thing: God has given us a better way, one that, at first, makes you scratch your head and think, *What? How does that make sense?*


And maybe this is why I wish we were on a coffee date. Because then you'd see how seriously I mean it when I say: what actually changed everything for me in this unending search for adequacy, enoughness, whatever you want to call it, was truly understanding God's grace—by which I mean, reclaiming it from its trite usage and looking at it from a biblical point of view—and I almost missed it. It almost seemed too simple, or like there should be more to it, but this is what I've learned takes us from a place of striving to living fully into our spiritual potential as image bearers of a bigger-than-we-think God. I've learned that what I needed was more than the latest prescription; I needed a proper diagnosis and a true solution for my endless striving.

That's the journey I want us to undertake together here. This is not a call to get busy; it's a call to get *discerning*.

Because what we've been busy doing isn't working. We've



*This is not a call
to get busy ;
it's a call to get
discerning .*



gotten out of sync with the foundations of what we believe and why our beliefs about God matter in our everyday lives. My goal is to help you realign with what it really means to trust in the grace of God. And to stop thinking of your relationship with Jesus as something adequate to save you from eternal despair but not enough to secure your identity here and now.

At least that's what my actions say I believe when I trust in Jesus for salvation but trust in myself (think: control and manipulate my circumstances) to navigate life. The weariest, most powerless times of my life have been made so not because there wasn't enough content filled with strategies available for the Christian life, but rather because not enough of that material grounded me in what is actually *life-changing* and not just self-bettering.

Could it be that we are so worn and desperate for ways to better ourselves because we've missed the power, inherent in the grace of God, that eradicates self-improvement altogether?

Is it possible that we keep trying to answer the wrong question—"Am I enough?"—when we're really wanting to know: "Is God enough?"

The answer to the latter will satisfy the first.



In *What's Wrong with the World*, G. K. Chesterton wrote, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."¹ His thought is comforting for me as I think about all the ways I can feel discouraged in my relationship with God and want to give up. Do you feel confused at times with God's job versus your job in the Christian life? It

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could be because the truth of God's grace, when you really think about it, is outrageous. So we downplay it, sometimes subconsciously, and tend to want to lean back on ourselves. We look at the outlandish claim of the gospel that Jesus accomplishes everything we can't and deem it as less than sufficient for change and transformation in believers. We think we must need to add something more to it. After all, it makes sense for us to also have to pull some weight, right?

We might not say we believe a Jesus-plus-our-efforts idea of the gospel, but when we place our performances on the pedestal of personal progress, we're not relying on the grace of God. We're worshiping the gospel of self-reliance. Self-reliance is something we can control, manipulate, and measure according to our efforts. Grace, on the other hand, is countercultural with its rejection of self-sufficiency and its relinquishing of power. Whether we recognize it or not, our culture is sadly intoxicated with the lure of all that's measurable and based on self-reliance, even for those who claim to represent the gospel of Christ. We say we trust that Jesus is enough, but we spend our lives trying to prove that *we are*, instead.

Finding the gospel old news and antiquated, we end up substituting self-help and formulas for our true means for change—the grace of God.

What wears you out today? Is it the impossible standards? The comparison? The baggage of trying your best and your best not being “good enough?”

I see you, friend—trying to read your Bible and keep a quiet time.

I see you, mama—working to keep up with the latest strategies in parenting so your kids will “turn out right.”

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I see you, college grad—goal setting and life strategizing, seeking ways to use your gifts and talents for fear of wasting your life.

I see you, sister—feeling behind before you’ve even started.

I see you, and I am you. I’ve been in those places more than once, and I’m here to tell you that you don’t have to keep living there. The abundant life God has promised his children is so much more than that. Shall we walk there together? This journey is for you; you can start right where you are. And I promise—this will change everything.

PART 1



When Striving Isn't Enough



ONE



Bent and Broken

Striving to Please

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

—2 CORINTHIANS 12:9

Your name comes from the word for a willow—bending easily but not easily broken,” my mother said, as she gracefully formed the Chinese character for my name, stroke by stroke, every mark placed in order. I’m an artist. I can’t help but appreciate the pictorial aspect of the Chinese language; each character tells a story.

With my name, my mother meant for me to know strength. Hidden within the feminine exterior of the name *Rou*—meaning soft, gentle, or lovely—was a root of resilience and tenacity.

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I'd need exactly those traits as I accompanied my parents from Taiwan to the United States as a child, finding my place in a new land to call home. Learning a new language, new systems, unexpected flavors and textures (hello, Kraft Singles American cheese), and different acceptable norms, values, and standards for beauty (think: tanned skin over pale porcelain) required every bit of adaptability, resilience, and tenacity my mother implied in the lexical origin of my name.

People often marvel that I learned English as quickly as I did but comment on how hard it must have been for my parents and me to adapt to life in the United States. Yes, it's amazing to think of all the ways our little family overcame the obstacles of language, transportation, education, and culture, but the greatest challenge was figuring out what it took to be accepted—and to assimilate.

What is expected of me? How do I fit in? What do other girls wear to a birthday party? Is it better to stand out or to disappear? What kind of lunch box will make people like me? (Hint: in 1980 it was Strawberry Shortcake.) As a first grader, I thought these questions were unique to my personal story of crossing the ocean, learning a new language, and finding friends in a new school, but it turns out these attempts to meet “standard” populate everyone's internal dialogue.

You don't have to be an immigrant to feel well-acquainted with this futile mission. Anyone who has ever moved to a new town, been the new student on campus, started a social media account, found a different friend group, joined a gym, or given her life to Christ understands the question that wells up inside each of us: *What must I do to be enough here?*

I've been leading GraceLaced Co. since its founding in 2013

(some of you may remember when it was solely a blog by the same name in 2007), and because I use online platforms to encourage people through both business and ministry, I'm especially cognizant of how our constant access to curated, well-defined perspectives can contribute to either healthy reorientation of our thoughts or unhealthy condemning self-awareness—the latter always telling us that we're not quite fitting in yet, that we've missed the mark and must endlessly strive to attain it.

This endless striving is what I struggled with in those early days of my youth—and still struggle with today. While being *tenacious* and *not easily broken* can be helpful when adjusting to new environments, the other side of it is sometimes a tendency toward people-pleasing, shape-shifting, and bending oneself to seek another's approval. Resilience can be Malleable and Compliant's tougher older sister. The "You go, girl" armor to our "Am I enough?" Even the dictionary gives *pliable* as a synonym for the word *resilience*. Either quality can be an asset—or a burden. *Bending easily but not easily broken* was simultaneously freeing and oppressing for me. Who doesn't want to know resilience? But somewhere along the way I detoured onto the path toward becoming, instead, someone *pleasing*. Someone others favored.

As a young woman taking cues from my left and my right, from what was spoken and unspoken, applauded and shamed, it sure felt like earning favor was more than a strong suggestion; it was a cultural expectation. While differently expressed, both the Eastern and Western worlds I was caught between considered favor and approval most valuable commodities.

Not much has changed in the world that surrounds us, decades later. Being pleasing—being someone who matters, who belongs, who is favored, liked, popular, fawned over, and

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admired—has become a global pastime, if not an obsession. As I write, over one hundred million people in the United States alone are scrambling for attention, favor, and popularity on the short-video social media platform known as TikTok. And just yesterday, I read of one popular user losing five hundred thousand followers within a matter of days because of some unfavorable behavior that made for bad PR.

Let's be honest: it's not favor in itself that TikTokers are craving; it's what favor and popularity deliver. Brand partnerships, media attention, book deals, name recognition, a sense of arriving. The ability to please others pays, and we've built our lives around its winnings.

Pleasing others to gain favor or preference has driven millions of dollars in cosmetic surgery, social media campaigns, brand management, and products we reach for every day without even thinking about it. Endlessly chasing approval and affirmation isn't the exception; it's the rule. And the same angst that drives us to secure belonging and acceptance through choosing the right words, posting the right things on social media, doing what's widely accepted, and being the most likable versions of ourselves accompanies us into our lives in Christ. Left unchallenged, this angst leaves us limping along—lacking the joy, hope, peace, assurance, and transformation we expect to experience as believers. A worldly means of favor was never meant to deliver an otherworldly means of grace.



From the conversations I have around my kitchen table to the ones I have with readers around the country, I keep hearing

similar stories from women who want to see breakthrough in their lives. They want to break the cycle of worry, fear, weariness, busyness, comparison, or joylessness. They want to feel accepted, known, loved, and enough for what God has called them to do. These are Bible-believing women in church, reading good books, participating in Bible studies, loving their families, serving their communities, and doing hard things. These are women who know what to tell a friend who's questioning her worth and her purpose. These are women who love Jesus. I'm one of these women; I'm guessing you may be too.

I meet so many of you while speaking at Christian events and conferences, and if you only knew—I wrestle with my own enoughness at these events too. I've heard it said that there are authors who speak, and then there are speakers who write books occasionally. I'm the former. Public speaking turns my insides out. For me, it's a combination of lifelong stage fright mixed with the steep learning curve of stage presence after a lifetime of local presence from my kitchen table—and *not* with lights and cameras. I love speaking after I finish the work. I love the opportunity to step out from behind a screen, a beautifully published book, an edited photo, and the packaged artwork that customers receive—and show up as myself, unfiltered, unedited, unpolished: a real middle-aged woman preaching the same truths to herself as she preaches to others. I'm so grateful to be invited and to be entrusted with the hearts of women who come to listen. But the weeks, days, and even moments leading up to my time at the podium before hundreds of thousands are fraught with doubts and convincing narratives:

I'm not funny enough.

I'm not eloquent enough.

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I'm not godly enough.

I'm not experienced enough.

I'm not punchy enough.

I'm not animated enough.

I'm not interesting enough.

I'm not knowledgeable enough.

I'm not like [name of any peer I admire] enough.

I promise—these feel ridiculous for me to say out loud (I mean, what is this—middle-aged meets middle school?), and I wouldn't even vulnerably write them out here if I didn't think that you sometimes hear these things whispered in your ear too.

Recently, after having not spoken for some time at an event due to a year of pandemic restrictions, I found myself unnecessarily gripped with fear while preparing for my session at the first major in-person event since COVID-19 cancellations. From a hotel room all alone, I felt the *not-enoughs* crowding out the message I was trying to prepare.

I knew I needed to have a chat with the Lord about what was going on in my heart and mind. I silenced my phone and turned off the music. And confessed aloud to the Lord: “God—you’ve gotta help me overcome this anxiety if you want me to do this work. You’ve gotta give me better coping skills, better speaking skills, better stage skills.”

And though I heard no audible sound in that hotel room, I did recall his words through the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

And as I remembered God's provision of grace to Paul, I was sure of his response to me:

It's not about you, child. I get to use you to make much of me if I want to, even if you don't feel the approval or favor you think you need. You don't need to be good enough. You need to be good with me being enough. How else do you think I'm going to deliver a message of grace through you?

I went to the event that night aware of my weaknesses but even more aware of God's faithfulness—before I even got onstage to deliver the closing keynote.

God desires to prove his faithfulness through our surrender in our weaknesses, but so often we choose to resist his help, clinging to our own determination to prove ourselves strong. We'd rather limp along in our striving than surrender in weakness. The reason we limp along and live worn out in our Christian lives is what I hope to uncover in these pages you hold in your hands, and it's what I seek to lead us out of through the means of grace.

In some ways, this journey has to start at the beginning of my story. I've written (and painted) my way through several books, all of which point to foundational truths about God's character, our identity in him, and how we can be rooted in truth through our everyday lives. Each of my previous books has been devotional in nature—meditations and studies that lead us to a deeper walk with the Lord. They've been some of my very favorite projects to date.


But this time, I want to tell you the backstory—the reason I care so much about foundational truths, believe that preaching truth to yourself matters, and advocate for beholding God's

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greatness in our mundane everyday. Beautiful, inspirational, and even compelling truths can only grow up into maturity when planted in good soil; otherwise, they're just pretty handpicked bouquets—delightful for a time but lacking any sustaining power. The most vibrant florals wilt and fade when not deeply rooted. This book is the hard-won, mended soil I've learned to cultivate in the last two decades of my life.

Good soil—really good soil—isn't just good because of the visible top layer of mulch that keeps it looking fresh and maintained. Good soil is known for its nutrients, substance, and moisture-keeping qualities; it's the stuff beneath the surface that really matters. Good soil seeks to hold on to every bit of thirst-quenching water it receives, and it releases nutrients to the roots established within it. Good soil is the difference between a plant that withers and a plant that grows, and, as Jesus taught, good soil is the difference between truth that transforms and truth that never takes root.

Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands



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it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. (Matt. 13:18–23)

We all live between two worlds. We are planted here on earth while our hope is in heaven. We are given work to do in temporary soil that, we're told, has the potential to spring up into unending fruit. We live in earthly bodies but abide in the eternal. In Christ, we are instantly transferred from dark to light, but we are continually being made new. Present progressive. It's ongoing and actively happening right now. Everything that is ours in Christ is true right now but, at the same time, not fully realized—yet. We are living the now and not yet. And in this in between, we can mistake *not yet* for *not enough* if we're not grounded in what the Bible actually says about God's favor and how we receive it.

We're *not yet* sinless, but his forgiveness is enough to make us clean.

We're *not yet* with him face-to-face, but his presence is enough to sustain us.

We're *not yet* fully transformed, but his glory is enough to declare us worthy.

Instead of deeply rooting ourselves within the substance of God's grace, we keep trying to fit grace into the framework of *our own* soil for success—a framework that feeds on our innate pressure to perform and seeks to sustain a standard that disappoints no one.

That's why we're so tired. That's why we keep hustling. That's why we never feel like we're enough. We're working so hard to bloom, to bend, to please that we've neglected the soil from which we flourish.

I'm convinced we live and act out of what we believe, meaning

that what we love most, believe wholeheartedly, and feel most convinced of will dictate the choices we make, the things we prioritize, the fears that consume us, and how we orient our lives.

Getting to the Root of It

I can only assume—in my own life and in yours—that when we run ragged chasing an unobtainable goal for arrival, we’re actually being chased down by an Enemy whose lies have been the same from the beginning of time: *God is not trustworthy. You have to be your own hero. You need to know more, be more, do more in order to save yourself*. . . from whatever your worst fear is.

Our culture’s answer to “Am I enough?” is always “You are if you believe it!”

We’re fed the formula: Soothe your fear of not being enough with achievement. Indulge in the kind of self-love that makes you resilient to anything or anyone that’s unloving. Be the best. Replace your sense of lack with control. Keep things neat and tidy. Cover up your exhaustion with religious effort that’s too nice to argue with.

The Enemy knows, if we follow this formula, we’ll eventually replace the true good news of Jesus Christ—that God’s son took on flesh, lived a sinless life, and died on a brutal cross as penalty for our sin, that we might be adopted as sons and daughters of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and made alive in Christ, just as he himself resurrected and overcame death—with our own gospel of self-improvement.

I know what you’re thinking. *How can self-bettering seem more appealing than Jesus?* Deception wouldn’t be doing its job

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it if looked like a fake. We believe this false gospel because it's almost like the real thing—just a little easier and more convenient to take in. We buy into this formula every single day.

But maybe you've already felt it deep down inside: the strategy for self-improvement is not really working. The race to becoming a more acceptable version of ourselves is simply *not enough*. It has never been enough, and it never will be. I should acknowledge here that many books have been written about this—I *know* I'm not novel in treating this topic of "enoughness," but my goal is not to rehash whether we are enough. Rather, I'm seeking to peel back the layers of *why* we continue in the cycle of thinking enoughness is attainable by our own means. And how all that striving has to do with what we really think about God's grace.

We keep trying to squeeze life out of a means that never matched the end. God gives his freedom and welcome in *his* way. And, truth is, this faulty framework and insufficient understanding of approval leaves us with only one of two options: We either keep striving—bending, maneuvering, adapting—to be what we think is required of us. Or, alternatively, we give up pleasing anyone else—including God—and only seek to please ourselves. You see, friend, if we believe it's up to us to be pleasing and enough, we can only try harder or stop caring altogether. Neither is what God intended for you.

So let's take a moment to be honest with ourselves—a bit of self-diagnosis here at the start. Did you pick up this book because you're always seeking to try harder, or are you on the brink of throwing in the towel with figuring out what God really wants *from* you and *with* you? It's okay if you can't quite answer that just yet, but maybe start with a little assessment. What's your


current response when you read about the Christian life in the Bible? Do you feel . . .

- grateful and relieved?
- stressed and guilty?
- tired of trying to figure it out?


You can trace your way back to your core belief by starting with your response. When you believe your only hope is God's grace, you'll respond with gratitude and relief. When you believe it's up to you to perfectly please God, you'll struggle with guilt and fear. And if you believe God is unknowable, unkind, or unfair in what he asks of his creation, you'll stop trying to know him at all. My most anxious, weary, and discouraged times are not simply seasons affected by circumstance; they are seasons shaped by wrong core beliefs about God. What do you find yourself believing in this season?

Even all the way back in the garden of Eden, Eve doubted God—her core belief was that God might be holding out on her. And so her response was reaching out and taking what she believed was lacking in God's plan and provision.

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. (Gen. 3:4–6)



You can't treat
the symptom
without
identifying
the cause.



Eve wasn't simply tempted into a momentary lapse in judgment; she acted out of her belief. She believed God's directions and provisions for her good were not enough; she believed she knew better than God.

You can't treat the symptom without identifying the cause.

When I lose my temper and yell at my kids, when I withhold forgiveness in my heart, when I'm careless about what I'm entertained by, I'm acting out of a core belief that I can get where I want to go *my way*.

I want compliance—I use my tone to demand it.

I want justice—and withhold my forgiveness.

I want the comfort distraction brings—and settle for less than what's worthy.

You see, none of those choices are made in the moment; they are formed long before we decide to act on them with our eyes, hands, or lips. What we believe about what God's given and what we think we need determines the choices we make.

We were made to please God alone. He created us out of his good pleasure:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. . . . And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. (Gen. 1: 27–28, 31)

Sin is our bending away from God and into allyship with our own fears, insecurities, and ineptitude. We fell out of alignment when sin entered the world. As image bearers, our true potential is to reflect—to image—a holy God. That means that we were meant to reflect him. Sin didn't just cause our misalignment; it

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blocked our ability to truly desire alignment with our Creator, God, as we ought. We've been chasing after alignment with our own ideas and purposes by our own means ever since the fall, bending and trying to fit our form into the ever-changing picture of what it is to be worthy.

And when we bend—straining against what we're created for—we break.



TWO



Unworthy

Striving for Attention

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me!
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

—PSALM 139:1–3

*M*y childhood years were fraught with all that you'd expect of a kid figuring out how to live between two worlds, eager to tell of my experiences to parents who couldn't relate. After a full day of English speaking and middle school drama, I'd come home and share all the social and emotional details of my American school

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life. To do so, I'd revert back to Mandarin. I speak Mandarin with my parents, even if I lack vocabulary or true fluency. It's our native tongue, their heart language, and the one thing that's never changed in the past four decades of my life. Though it was challenging to report the day's events in Mandarin, it was worth the effort in order to disclose all the unbelievable details about my middle school life.

On one occasion in seventh grade, the evening download was especially poignant and memorable. I always took forever to finish dinner (not anymore), and with a small home and just the four of us, one of my parents always lingered at the table to work on something parental as I finished my meal. That evening, after a particularly dramatic and socially gruesome day at the prestigious private school I attended on scholarship, I started in on my recounting of all the juicy details after dinner. My father was still at the table, and I was eager to let him into my crazy life. I drew a long breath and told my story—the life-altering truths of my day.

“You won't believe it,” I began. “Sarah said mean things about Jenny again. She told everyone that Jenny wanted to be Matt's girlfriend, so Sarah broke up with him and kissed Billy at lunch recess. Jenny was embarrassed and so mad. She spent lunch in the girls' bathroom and locked herself in a stall because she was being dramatic. Then all the popular girls heard about it and found her in the bathroom before fifth period and tried to comfort her. Except Maggie and Lisa's group—they were happy she was sad and went to tell the teacher that everyone was in the bathroom confessing all the things they did last year when they were seventh graders, things they would *never* do now that they've matured. Then, Jenny and Sarah made up and became

best friends again. I don't know why, but I don't do anything mean to anyone and none of them ever—”

I stopped, realizing that, while I was fully engrossed in the recounting of my middle-school-girl-drama stories—events that rocked my world and challenged everything I knew about the game of love, boys, and friendship—and was pouring out all the details of my life to my father at the kitchen table, he seemed completely unaware that I was even talking to him.

My father is a quiet man. He shows love through fixing the sink. He's not terribly emotive and rarely weighs in about anything unless asked. But this . . . this was more than quiet. This felt cold.

He didn't look up. He didn't raise an eyebrow, roll his eyes, laugh at the silliness, or even show an ounce of interest. My father wasn't the kind of dad who would invite me over to sit on his lap so he could tell me how precious I was or how these crazy middle school years would soon pass. This wasn't like the scenes I'd seen in the movies or the interactions I'd watch sometimes at friends' houses where American fathers would call their daughters “Daddy's little girl.” Honestly, having a cool distance between us was normal. My dad wasn't one to seize the opportunity to make sure I felt seen, known, loved, or wanted. He wasn't particularly eager to be a safe place for me.

On this evening, though, I had feelings I wanted him to acknowledge. I had expectations, and they weren't being met. It felt difficult to share all the details of my life, and I wanted a response. I was ready to call him out for his lack of engagement this time. (How could he not care about these events of my day?!)

“Why don't you ever care or respond when I talk to you?”

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I demanded, feeling justified in my frustration after disclosing such personal, intimate details about my preteen life.

My father's succinct response, instead, broke through that momentary silence without a hint of emotion, explanation, or empathy. He shut me down with six simple words: "*Ni hai mei you xi wan.*"

Translation: "You have not finished the dishes."

I remember being speechless (which, turns out, is very rare for me) and instantly went silent. I grabbed the dish soap, squirted some on the scrub brush, and filled up the sink with water. I closed my mouth and finished the dishes.

My parents were incredibly industrious people, working multiple jobs to provide for my brother and me. They came to true saving faith as I was entering high school, the same point at which I surrendered my life to Christ. In some ways, my parents and I were infants in our faith together. This perspective helps me process some of those formative years of life. Now that I'm in my forties, I have a knowing appreciation for what it took to simultaneously make a living, learn new norms, raise children who assimilated quickly (too quickly), and to do so all while learning when to hold on tighter and when to let go in the war of worlds.

But those six words shaped much of my view of God for a very long time.

You have not finished the dishes.

What implications did I internalize from those six words?

- What I do is more important than who I am.
- I'm not worthy of his time if I'm not doing a good job.
- The details of my life aren't interesting to my father unless they have to do with what I'm getting done.

- You have to earn your right to be paid attention to.
- I can't ask for anything if I haven't held up my end of the deal.
- I shouldn't expect empathy if I'm not perfectly empathetic.
- I get what I deserve, so I should become deserving.

And that internal dialogue became the framework for how I perceived the Lord as my heavenly Father. I internally imagined him saying:

- *You haven't read your Bible—don't come to me until you do.*
- *You haven't made the right choices—don't cry for help now that you're in trouble.*
- *You haven't acted very Christlike—clean yourself up before you draw near.*

No one told me to draw those conclusions; they just came naturally. We don't have to try very hard to have an inadequate, incomplete view of God. Or to project the realities of our earthly fathers onto our expectations of our heavenly Father. We're hard-wired to fill in all the gaps of our unknowns with trust in no one else but ourselves.

That's what idolatry is. It's aligning our hearts' allegiance and love to anything less than the true recipient of our worship: God himself.

I'll be honest—for me, that idol can easily be my own control and what I think it takes to maintain it. If the serpent found a willing ally in Eve to doubt God's promises and sovereign care, all while both Adam and Eve had unhindered fellowship with

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God, how much more are we susceptible to believing wrongly about who God is when we have imperfect fatherhood modeled for us by earthly, human dads?

Because we naturally form patterns of thought in our minds based on our feelings, we must be intentional about replacing our faulty ideas of God with what is actually true about who he is and what he desires from us. Otherwise, we will operate out of self-pity, self-condemnation, our sense of guilt, and the cultural cues that define our worthiness.


Imagine all that I forfeited with an inaccurate picture of God and his availability to me: assurance, peace, comfort, strength, joy, freedom; so much missed simply because I believed wrongly about what I needed in order to come, and *keep coming*, to God.

Let me be honest here about a perennial struggle I have with coming to God, again and again. Every year Troy, my husband, and Caleb, my oldest son, complete a one-year-through-the-Bible reading plan through their *esv* app. They're both wired to love routine and slow mornings. They both read voraciously and consistently, undistracted by the demands of social media. Every year I try to do the same, but I'm just the opposite. I'm not a morning person, not terribly good at routine, and easily distracted by more pressing and seemingly productive tasks that give me the results I think I need and get me ahead (ahem—thus the topic of this book, friend). Most of the time, during a Bible reading plan, I get stuck somewhere in Leviticus or the Minor Prophets and fall behind with the schedule. While I know in my head that the schedule is not what saves me, I'm still tempted to pull away and give up when I've "failed" to stay on track.

An inaccurate view of God—that he's unavailable until we do our part—will cause us to think that something replenishing, like



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reading our Bibles, is about us and our accomplishment and not about God and his invitation. We stay away and forfeit the welcome we have in Christ when our ability to draw near is informed by a faulty view of God.

What faulty views of God do you have? Do your beliefs about what kind of Father he is line up with the Bible? Let's take a moment to look at what Scripture tells us. I don't want to just tell you about him; I don't want you to just take my word for it. I need you to know how welcomed you are through Christ—but take his word on it, instead.


- *He is patient with us.* “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6).
- *He calls us sons and daughters.* “He predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:5).
- *He is a tender father we needn't fear.* “You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom. 8:15).
- *He knows our frailty yet has compassion on us.* “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:13–14).
- *He knows everything about us (and made us lovingly).* “O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. . . . For you

formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb" (Ps. 139:1–3, 13).


- *He invites us in and makes us family.* "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19).
- *He makes us able to draw near with confidence.* "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb. 4:16 NIV).
- *He listens to the detail and fears and burdens we bear, and he responds.* "You heard my plea: Do not ignore my cry for relief. You came near whenever I called you; you said, 'Do not be afraid.' You championed my cause, Lord; you redeemed my life" (Lam. 3:56–58 CSB). (If you read all of Lamentations 3 you find a beautiful example of pouring one's heart out to the Lord—in detail.)

You're the only one who knows the well-worn path in your pattern of thought when it comes to God, our heavenly Father. You may say with your lips, "He is faithful. He is good." But do your actions reveal a different truth?

When we believe an earthly father is available, knowable, inviting, and good, we go running to him. We don't hesitate to pursue a father who welcomes us with open arms, who looks up from his work and really listens, who shows concern when we cry, who holds us when we ache, who's patient with our petty complaints and silly stories. In the same way, we go running to God when we believe him to be that kind of Father. But we shy away and guard ourselves more when an earthly father doesn't



What we believe
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pursue us or seems silent. When he is bad at listening or isn't available. We hide. We stay away. We pretend.

What we believe about our Father determines how we come to him—or if we come at all.

What's keeping you from drawing near to your Father? Are you coming to him hindered? Fearful? Feeling unworthy? Are you coming defensively? Lacking ears to hear? Whatever it is, the first step in this journey is tracing your way backward from your present view of God. Where does it lead you?

Does it lead you back to the Word of God and what Scripture says about him?

Does it lead you back to your own sense of guilt, shame, or unworthiness?

Does it lead you back to an idea that's been modeled imperfectly by imperfect family members?

Everything God says about himself in the Word of God and every way he's revealed himself to creation and to his children has always been to declare:

I am faithful, in spite of your faithlessness.

So if you find yourself constantly trying to work toward being deemed worthy of God's attention, thinking you have to be enough before you can be fully welcomed, assuming his love and faithfulness is only in place if your actions are perfect, take a step back. Find your way to the firm foundation of who the Bible says he is. And remember:

You are welcome, even when you haven't been consistently in the Word.

You are invited, even when your faith is lacking.

You are loved, even if you're ashamed of your track record.



THREE



Just Amazing Enough to Not Need Grace

Striving to Be Good Enough

*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.*

—JOHN NEWTON, “AMAZING GRACE”



If I am honest, I'd say I spent much of my early Christian life singing “Amazing Grace” while living like the words were actually “God, let me be so amazing that I won't need grace.”

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As I unpacked a bit already, despite access to good churches, a Christian college, and a seemingly good foundation in the Christian faith, I eventually found myself spiraling in an effort to prove myself, secure myself, and flailing in my faith when I couldn't measure up. Hiding the shame of walking away from the privilege afforded me as a dual enrollment high school student taking undergrad classes at UC Berkeley, and the disappointment of forfeiting some of the most promising scholarships I could receive at other schools (including a full ride at Westmont College), I moved back home my second year of college and returned to the state school in my hometown, in New Mexico. In that same season I sabotaged a multiyear relationship with a good and kind young man I'd thought I would marry.

I was deeply heartbroken and ashamed. I couldn't forgive myself but learned to distract my pain. My hidden shame and secret turmoil had been stacking against me despite the respectable, responsible, even enviable exterior I'd managed to maintain. No one knew how confused I felt. Some of us are pros at making our mistakes look intentional, neatly wrapped up, and quickly forgotten in the light of our achievements. Some of us can deflect pain with a convincingly perfect performance. That was me.

Running from that which was difficult, from my disappointment in myself, had so become my modus operandi that my path of least resistance led me right back to my hometown, unable to figure out what I really wanted or where I was going. In God's kindness and sovereignty, my need for distraction led me to join a collegiate ministry—the Baptist Student Union at the University of New Mexico (now called Christian Challenge). I started going about the same time that the collegiate minister in that season, Dale, began teaching weekly through the Sermon on the Mount

JUST AMAZING ENOUGH TO NOT NEED GRACE

in Matthew 5. As can be the case for many raised in the church, though, all the stories were familiar. And, if I was honest, they felt irrelevant to what I was going through and the decisions I was facing.


The gospel can feel like old news if we believe it merely good for salvation and miss its potency for true life. That's where I was when I walked into the Baptist Student Union. The gospel felt stale to me—the stuff of Vacation Bible School—and more like a membership card than an active lifeline. I didn't see how the gospel could have any bearing on my life right then. To me, it was simply a line in the sand for those who chose heaven over hell.

Dale, who later became a dear friend and mentor to both Troy and me, clearly and deliberately called our attention to Jesus' teaching. As simple as the message was, I heard it then for the astounding truth that it was with clarity—perhaps for the first time. This is the passage Dale read aloud:


You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire. . . .

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt. 5: 21–22, 27–28)

I remember feeling called out, though I had clearly never thought of myself as being on par with a murderer or adulterer.



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JUST AMAZING ENOUGH TO NOT NEED GRACE

But I knew all my regrettable mistakes. I knew how I'd used my words to cut and tear down. I knew the ways I'd dishonored the Lord with the opposite sex. Hearing these words as they were read to an entire room full of college students, I felt exposed. My secret sins might as well have been on display, scrolling across a jumbotron: *Hey, you, little miss perfect Chinese girl in the back. You're not fooling anyone. You're a failure. Your best isn't good enough. You're not good enough. You'll never be good enough.*

And then I heard these words explaining what Jesus said, and they changed everything: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 20).

Dale continued, "God set the bar high. Man tried to reach it through self-righteousness, so God set it higher—higher than we can jump."

In that moment it finally clicked for me. Even though I had understood and acknowledged that Jesus died to pay the penalty for my sin and canceled the debt that I owed him, the gospel finally made sense in a complete way.

I can never be good enough, jump high enough, perform well enough to *not need grace*.

I can't help but say it again in case you let it roll over you the first time. This is important.

You and I can never be good enough, jump high enough, perform well enough to not need grace.

If that discourages you or causes you to slump your shoulders in frustration, you've missed the good news. I wonder, Christ follower, would we be so exhausted if we actually grasped how good the good news really is? If Jesus breaks us free of the chains that bound us to our hamster wheel of striving and measuring up,

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then why would we run back to those chains, dragging around a weight of expectation and condemnation day by day?

It was true in my life and it may be for you, as well: we can't know true freedom if we expect grace to make us merely better, rather than completely new. Better seeks to measure up; completely new requires a miracle.

We sell ourselves short when we receive the gift of God's forgiveness and his grace as a self-betterment strategy—as self-help. He wants nothing less than all of you and all of me. Not just our tough seasons, our unexpected times of trial, our desperate prayers when we have nowhere else to turn, or our pleading for strength to meet a goal. He might meet us there to start, but he's in the business of total transformation, not a plan for improvement or one TV makeover episode.

Growing up, I was no stranger to the pursuit of self-betterment, of being *amazing*. In my mind, it looked like straight As, graduating with honors, winning piano competitions, staying home to study, respecting my elders, signing up for the hardest classes, and having letters after your name. It looked like titles, resumes, and getting ahead by never rocking the boat. It's okay if you don't relate to this, but we'll be better friends if you know this about me:


I once thought anything less than getting into Stanford or MIT was wasting your life.

I declared a biochem major just because it seemed like the right thing to do for someone taking a class in engineering calculus at UC Berkeley while finishing high school.

After fifteen years of piano lessons, I wanted to learn jazz, but instead I signed up for the most difficult piece I could find by Franz Liszt just to top some unspecified standard in my mind.



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true freedom
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At seventeen, I wore myself out with credential collecting. Academically, college-advisors prescribed all the best things to have on your college application, and I was determined to check each off my list and then some. At home, the badges of honor were invisible, only understood through affirmation or disapproval, warmth or aloofness, pride or utter disappointment. Badges and credentials aren't always visible, but they're so often felt.

The problem with chasing achievement is that it leaves you with only two options: be enslaved to ever-increasing demands to achieve (because you actually never “arrive”) or give up in defeat. My sophomore year of college, when I saw myself reflected in the Sermon on the Mount, I finally began to see that my giving up after a string of disappointments was not just a dreaded dissolution of expecting myself to be amazing. It was really the beginning to finding just how amazing Jesus is.

Maybe you're familiar with the apostle Paul (yep, “The Apostle Formerly Known as Saul”). I can't think of a better example of someone who had “amazing” as part of his resume and credentials. Before God confronted him and redeemed his life on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9—we'll look at it in the next chapter), he was actively persecuting believers as a most upstanding, overachieving, rule-following Pharisee.

Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Phil. 3:4–6)

JUST AMAZING ENOUGH TO NOT NEED GRACE

But Paul, surrendered to Jesus Christ, described his transformation thus:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (vv. 7–11)

Notice his choice of words: *whatever, everything, all things, not . . . my own.*

These are 180 words—descriptions of a total turning, a complete transformation, 180 degrees from where he was headed. Paul didn't become a better version of himself or a godlier Jew; Paul became completely God's.

How would you describe the grace of God in your life? Is it the boost you need when you're struggling? The empowerment that helps you do better? Is it *sometimes* your hope, *some* of the change in your life, and *a part* of what makes you get up in the morning?

God didn't give us the standard of righteousness in Matthew 5 (or through any other law of God, more on that later) so that we could meet it in ourselves, but that we might recognize that Jesus met all of it on our behalf. This is grace.

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If your idea of grace has been that it's a crutch for the weak, a mantra for the doing-my-best crowd, or the nice thing you say to yourself until you make yourself better, you're missing out.

If you've been feeding on the idea of grace as a pass, a group hug, or a jolly Santa-like God the Father telling you, "Hey, child. No big deal. Your complaining, your worrying, your unhappiness—no worries. You're fine just the way you are," you're missing out.

Friend, I was missing out.

Simply put, God demonstrated through the law that we could never be enough so his love, provision, goodness, holiness, power, and faithfulness would be seen for what it truly is: our only way to being enough to stand before a holy God.

And here's where I fear we stop in our Christian lives, flip the page spiritually, and start looking for our personal game plans—now that we're "okay" before God. We thank him for rescuing us but so often miss the part where he wants *relationship* with us.

God doesn't stop there at making us fit to stand before his presence.

He goes the distance, sheltering us with his love, and marks us favored for his purpose.

Not just fit but favored.

Not just enough to not receive rejection but more than enough to be welcomed in.

In the kingdom, the opposite of amazing isn't disappointing; it's appointed.

Here's what I mean: When we wrongly think that the gospel simply makes us better, we will endlessly strive in our own strength. But when we receive the grace of God as our only credential—the one thing that gives us a place and purpose in



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WHEN STRIVINGS CEASE

the kingdom of God—we live as those appointed, given the power and authority of the Father for all that he's given us to do.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, self-reliant, fearful, and
anxiously trying to make my life matter,
but now I'm found and favored, appointed
and not a disappointment.
I was blind, but now I see.*

Lord, help us to see.

About the Author



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