

HAVE YOU GOT TIME FOR THREE QUICK QUESTIONS?

This book explores three important questions designed to guide you in making course corrections each day in order to stay on track with God and His best for your life. Pastor Rod Loy leads you through a process for examining your motives, sources of power and wisdom and your willingness to speak the truth with the goal of establishing a grid for making decisions, establishing right relationships and growing in faith and trust in God.

Rod Loy is Senior Pastor at First Assembly of God in North Little Rock, Arkansas.

Trade Paper

5 ½ X 8 ½

208 pages

October 2011 release

Item # 50-0117

ISBN 978-1-936699-15-5

\$14.99

Order from Influence Resources

InfluenceResources.com

Also available from Spring Arbor, STL, and Anchor.

Rights available through ABridge International

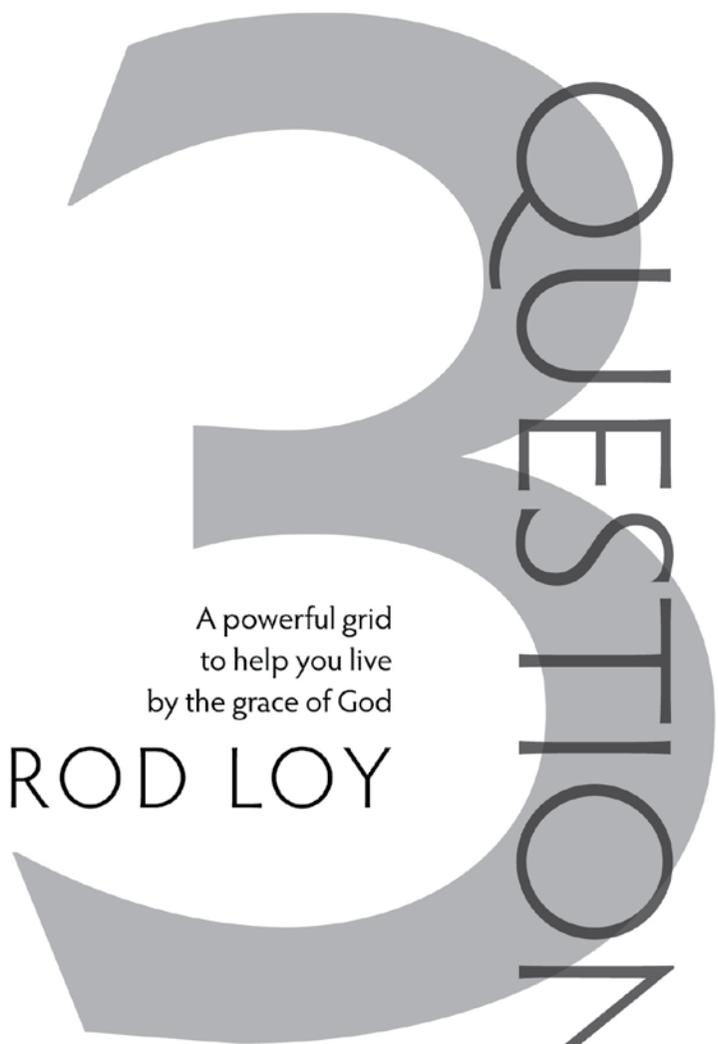


ROD LOY

A powerful grid
to help you live
by the grace of God

Pre-Release Sampler

THREE
QUICK
QUESTIONS



QUESTIONS

A powerful grid
to help you live
by the grace of God

ROD LOY



Influence

Copyright © 2011 by Rod Loy
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Published by Influence Resources
1445 N. Boonville Ave., Springfield, Missouri 65802

Published in association with The Quadrivium Group—Orlando, FL
info@TheQuadriviumGroup.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the copyright owner, except brief quotations used in connection with reviews in magazines or newspapers.

Cover design by interior formatting by Anne McLaughlin
of Blue Lake Design, Dickinson, Texas.

Unless otherwise specified, Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™
Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Note: To protect the anonymity of some of the people in the stories, names and details have been changed.

ISBN: 978-1-93669-915-5
First printing 2011

Printed in the United States of America

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Foreword

CHAPTER 1 OUTRAGEOUS GRACE

CHAPTER 2 DANCING ON A STRING

CHAPTER 3 WHO'S CLAPPING?

CHAPTER 4 RUNNING ON EMPTY

CHAPTER 5 OUR PART, GOD'S PART

CHAPTER 6 DO YOU REALLY CARE?

CHAPTER 7 TRUTH TELLERS

CHAPTER 8 WALK WELL

Endnotes

About the Author

Using *3 Questions* in Classes and Groups

To Order More Copies



1

OUTRAGEOUS GRACE

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.

Paul

I was devastated. I put my head down on my desk to hide. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't let anyone see me doing that. As I buried my face in my hands, I came to a fierce, determined commitment: I'll never be *that guy* again!

When I was a kid, I was a misfit, a nerd, a geek. No matter what label anyone pinned on me, it amounted to the same evaluation. I was a loser. By the time I reached junior high school, my hormones failed to transform me into Brad Pitt. I wore thick glasses, I had unruly hair, I was skinny, and I read a book a day. I went to the public library every week and checked out the maximum books allowed. I always carried a stack of books with me wherever I went. I read anything that had a cover: novels, history,

and biographies. When I finished a test or assignment, I didn't talk to other kids. I read the book I'd picked for that day. Books were my security blanket—that's not exactly the prescription for "the most popular kid in class." To no one's surprise, I was painfully shy. I was well aware that I didn't fit in. I was so socially backward that I worried myself sick if a teacher assigned me to read a book report to the class. Quite often, I got sick to my stomach and begged my mom to let me stay home that day.

A kid in our neighborhood picked on me almost every day when we walked home after school. He knocked books out of my hands, laughed as I picked them up, and then knocked them out of my hands again. It was a great sport for him. I didn't want to fight him for several reasons. I was so awkward and thin that I was sure he'd beat me to a pulp, and if my glasses fell off, I'd be almost blind. My eyesight was 20/400 without my Coke-bottle lenses.

One day in gym class, Coach Martin told me to wrestle the biggest, strongest kid on the school football team. I was fairly athletic, but I weighed about as much as a gnat, and I was totally devoid of confidence. As soon as Coach Martin told us to get on the mat, the other boys in the class hooted and hollered because they were sure I was going to get creamed. The big guy didn't pin me, but I was hurt far worse by all the laughs at my expense.

In Mr. Sellent's algebra class, I sat behind the most beautiful girl in junior high, Beth Grayson. She was 5' 4" with short brown hair and a pretty smile. Everybody wanted to be her friend . . . including me. I daydreamed about her—not about having a romantic relationship, but only about being her friend. I knew if I

could be *her* friend, everyone else would accept me, too. One day in class, I tapped her on the shoulder and whispered, “Beth, do you have an extra pencil? I forgot mine today.”

She turned around and glared at me. Her words dripped with venom: “Don’t talk to me. I don’t talk to people like you.”

That was a defining moment of my life. I knew I wasn’t the most popular boy in the school, and I was aware people avoided

me, but I had no idea that Beth Grayson found me repulsive. Every fiber of my heart was utterly crushed. I wanted to cry, but I restrained my tears. In that moment of stark, horrible revelation, I made a solemn vow to change my life so I’d never experience this kind of shame again.

Immediately, I went on a quest to become a different person. I wanted to change to make myself acceptable. The best way to win people over, I quickly concluded, was to make them laugh. I picked three people whose communication skills I wanted to copy. I studied what they said and how they said it. I noticed what they did that got the most laughs, and I observed how they used pauses for dramatic effect. When I got their patterns down, I practiced incessantly. I studied Johnny Carson because he was a master at creating comic tension. Johnny also was the best ever at “saves”—when something that was supposed to be funny didn’t work, he made it even more funny. I carefully observed Pee Wee Herman

Immediately, I went on a quest to become a different person. I wanted to change to make myself acceptable.

because he can make ordinary things very funny. And I scrutinized David Letterman to see how he creatively talks about a single object for twenty minutes and makes it all hilarious.

Underneath the smiles and jokes was a very hurt, confused, and lonely young man. All the hurt hadn't gone away. It was buried, and it festered into a deep resentment that couldn't be contained. After I acquired my new communication skills, I started hanging out with two friends who thought I'd become pretty cool. We played a game. We stood in the hall, and one of us pointed to an unsuspecting kid. All three of us then engaged the kid in conversation with the expressed purpose of making him cry. In fact, the one who made him cry was the winner. The rules were that we couldn't touch him. We only used words to cut, hack, and bludgeon the victim's soul. And we became quite good at it.

Gradually, I won some respect for being funny. The combination of a fairly quick wit, daily practice, and grim determination gave me the ability to come up with some good laughs. I was sure that if I could make people laugh, they'd accept me. I'd given up on Beth, but there was a whole world of people I could try to impress. I won a lot of them in the next few years, but there was one significant casualty—me. By trying to become someone else, I completely lost my identity. Before I determined to change, I hadn't liked who I was, but now I didn't even know who I was.

MEASURING STICKS

A few years later, my measuring stick changed. I realized making people laugh or cry probably wasn't going to get me very far in

life, so I established different standards for success. I studied hard, worked hard, and did everything I could do to prove to others and to myself that I was somebody. When I was eighteen, I made a list of the things I wanted to accomplish by the time I was thirty-five. If I could reach those, I was sure I'd feel great about myself. A few years later, I'd checked off every box on my list, but something very strange happened: I still felt lousy. Each time I reached a goal and realized it didn't give me the thrill I'd expected, I set it higher.

I graduated from college in three years. It was a way to prove I was an achiever. You'd think that I would have learned my lessons by the time I became a pastor, but we have mixed motives just like everyone else. I set a goal for our church to reach two thousand people. When we got there, it wasn't enough, so I targeted twenty-five hundred . . . then three thousand.

Finally, I realized there had to be something more fulfilling. I desperately wanted to find the answer so I could get off the treadmill of setting standards higher and higher but feeling rotten about them even when I achieved them. God led me to

Paul's letter to the Galatians, and as I read it, I saw three questions that pierced my heart. These questions formed a new way for me to think about life. They caused me to rethink what's important,

These questions formed a new way for me to think about life. They caused me to rethink what's important, examine my motives, and discover what's really important to God and to me.

examine my motives, and discover what's really important to God and to me. As an outstanding teacher, Paul uses many questions to stimulate his readers to think more deeply, but three stand out:

“Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people?” (1:10)

The first question addresses *our motive*. Who are we living for? Who deserves our love and loyalty?

“Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” (3:3)

The second question focuses on *our source of power and wisdom*. Do we trust our own abilities, or do we depend on the One who bought us?

“Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?” (4:16)

The last question surfaces *our willingness to speak truth* to the people around us. Most people are glad to hear our words of affirmation, but when we find the courage to speak hard words of truth, they may fiercely resist us. Our courage to step up and tell them the truth, though, is an open door for real change in their lives.

In this book, we're going to explore these three questions so they become imbedded in our minds and hearts. When they do,

they'll become a valuable template to help us make course corrections each day in order to stay on track with God and His best for our lives. But first, we need to understand why Paul asked these questions. The Galatian believers had a problem . . . a big problem.

NEW RULES

Anyone who reads Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians instantly realizes this letter is very different from his other letters to the believers. Paul is really angry with them. Throughout the letter, his tone is like a loving dad whose teenager has just done something really stupid. He affirms his love at the same time as he gets in their face!

Galatia was a region of modern Turkey, not just a single city. It was about the size of Arkansas. Paul had visited several of the cities there on his first journey to take the gospel to the Roman world. When God used Paul and Barnabas to perform miracles in Lystra, the crowd tried to proclaim them as gods. Paul would have nothing of it and gave glory to God. But in a dramatic switch, people came from Antioch and Iconium and convinced the crowd that Paul and Barnabas were traitors, so the people of Lystra tried to kill them! It shows you how quickly people can switch. In a matter of minutes, they went from hearing "You're a God" to "Kill Him!" They stoned Paul and left him for dead outside the city. When he was revived, he got up and went back to tell more people about Jesus. In every city, Paul faced verbal ridicule and physical attacks. His investment in the people of Galatia was huge. He had spent himself emotionally, physically, and spiritually to help them

experience the transforming grace of God. When he got word they'd walked away from Jesus, he was ticked off.

What had happened? After he left their region, a group of people known as Judaizers came to town and convinced the people that all the stuff Paul had said about grace wasn't the real picture. They said, "If you want to really walk with God, you need to follow the commands in the Bible. Follow them, and you're in; don't follow them, and you're out." The commands in the Bible are called "the law of God." God's laws were given to His people for several purposes: to show them His standard of holiness, to point them to grace because they (and we) can't measure up to His standards on our own, and to remind them (and us) how to live as believers. There are over six hundred commands in the Old Testament, covering issues as broad as diet, sacrifice, marriage, worship, and every other aspect of life. In addition, the religious leaders of Jesus' day added thousand more rules for people to follow. Today, when we talk about laws, we usually are referring to traffic regulations, the protection of life and property, or state and federal legislation. Law, standards, or rules—the terms are interchangeable, but if we choose to live by them, we never escape their oppressive power. No matter how many we follow, there are always some we forget each day. They're like the massive notebook that comes with a new software program. Countless glitches can happen because we're unaware of the intricacies of the code. If we live by the laws, we're always looking over our shoulder to see if God or anyone else will catch us failing—and failure is inevitable.

Some people might say that in our postmodern culture, we're relativists: "You can determine your own rules and reality, but don't tell me what I have to believe or do. I'm creating my own rules." Apart from grace, people gravitate to rules to define themselves. If they don't use the rules of God, their parents, or their

club, they create their own. I know a young man who has completely rejected the rules of his parents' home and his church. He insists he's free, but he lives by the unwritten but rigid rules of the drug culture: Get high, defy authority, have as much sex as you can get, and trust no one but each other. Living in the drug culture, this young man has adapted to its standards of clothing, language, finances, relationships, and behavior. This culture has very clear rules, and it uses ridicule and rejection to punish those who don't follow them.

No one lives apart from some concept of right and wrong. These concepts are the rules that determine our values, our relationships, and our choices.

When Paul toured the cities of Galatia, he explained that believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ isn't a commitment to follow all the rules in the Old Testament. Anyone with an ounce of self-awareness will admit he can't measure up to God's standards—but there's One who did. Jesus met the standard of

If we live by the laws, we're always looking over our shoulder to see if God or anyone else will catch us failing—and failure is inevitable.

perfection and stood in our place to pay the penalty we rightly deserve. It's called grace.

The concept of grace is one of the most revolutionary ideas in all of history. The ancient Roman world knew nothing of it. People rose if they had power, and they fell without it. People valued military might and financial strength. The idea of loving the unlovely and accepting the unacceptable was unthinkable. But that's what Jesus did.

Today, people have some common misconceptions about grace. We sometimes talk about "saying grace" at meals as if it's a meaningless ritual. Some of us who are a little older remember Grace Kelly, the Princess of Monaco, who was the epitome of elegance, beauty, and grace. But the most common misunderstanding of grace is that it's a warm, sweet, syrupy feeling we get from thinking about God. I'd like to propose a different view, one that Paul communicated everywhere he went: *Grace is a stunning rescue of helpless people*. Who does God rescue? Good people who have earned it? Not at all. Those who have jumped through a church's hoops? No, missed it again. People who have tried really hard to make themselves acceptable to God? No. Trying hard results in prideful self-righteousness if we do pretty well, or it produces shame when we repeatedly fail to live up to the standards.

Who is the person Jesus saves? The one who admits he has fallen, is flawed, and is completely helpless to win God's approval on his own. How big a deal is sin? A really big deal! Paul wrote the to the Romans that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). That means what we rightly deserve for our sins is the death of

separation from God's love and presence. Today, people wink at selfishness and laugh at sin. We may agree that murder is wrong, but we rationalize almost everything short of that. Most of us instinctively have a list of sins we keep in our minds. And we categorize the sins. There are really bad sins, bad sins, kind of bad sins, and sins we don't really count because we enjoy doing them. As long as we don't do the really bad ones (or don't do them too often), we feel pretty good about ourselves. But moving the benchmark of acceptable behavior doesn't deal with the fundamental problem of human depravity. We can't save ourselves no matter how hard we try. And sin isn't just breaking some set of arbitrary rules—it's breaking the heart of God.

Too often, people try to view the Christian faith through one of two lenses: being moral enough to earn God's approval or giving up and finding freedom by throwing off all the rules. The gospel isn't a blend or balance of these two; it's a third way. We acknowledge that God's standards are good and right, but we're well aware that we can never measure up. Our sense of failure doesn't drive us to despair—it leads us to the cross where we realize Jesus suffered the death we deserve to die and paid the price we could never pay.

Too often, people try to view the Christian faith through one of two lenses: being moral enough to earn God's approval or giving up and finding freedom by throwing off all the rules. The gospel isn't a blend or balance of these two; it's a third way.

Then, out of sheer gratitude for His love and acceptance, we want to please Him in every way we can. Then, God's standards take on a far different meaning. Instead of being steps to try to earn God's acceptance, they become ways we gladly choose to honor the One who rescued us. We don't obey to earn God's love; we obey because we're so thankful for His grace. There's a world of difference. The gospel doesn't do away with God's law, but it infuses the law with a very different purpose. Instead of it creating shame or pride in us, it becomes a directive to help us please our Father.

When we come to God, we come with empty hands and open hearts. If we come with a laundry list of our accomplishments, He's not impressed. But if we come with a broken heart, He warmly welcomes us. Jesus told a story about a tax collector and a Pharisee who went to the temple to pray. Pharisees were the ultimate rule-keepers. They felt smug because they followed so many rules so religiously. But tax collectors were at the other end of society's spectrum. They were Jews who collected taxes from their countrymen for the Roman occupiers. People considered them to be traitors, and they hated them. Jesus said these two men went into the temple. The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (Luke 18:11-12). But the tax collector's heart had been melted by God's grace. He wouldn't even look up. He beat his breast as he prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (verse 13).

Jesus explained, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt

themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (verse 14).

When Paul was in Galatia, the people had responded to him and his message as the tax gatherer had, with a broken and open heart, but after he left, they had become Pharisees. Paul didn’t mince words at the beginning of his letter. The Judaizers had hijacked Paul’s message of grace, and to add insult to injury, they had attacked him personally. Paul didn’t back down one inch. He fussed at the people, and he warned them to steer clear of the people who had ruined their concept of grace. He wrote:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God’s curse!
(Galatians 1:6-9)

Can’t you picture Paul’s face as he wrote these words? He was angry, but it wasn’t flippant annoyance. His anger rose out of his deep love for the people who had not only forsaken the freedom and hope of salvation, but had also gone back into the slavery of rules.

Here's my paraphrase of these verses. I think Paul was saying, "You idiots! After I taught you about the love and forgiveness found only in Jesus and you experienced the freedom and joy of His grace, you've turned your back on Him and me. Before I came, you tried to live by a set of rules, but you failed, and you were miserable. Why in the world have you gone back to those rules? There's no joy, no satisfaction, and no fulfillment in trying to keep them—only failure, shame, and bondage. You've gone back to the things Jesus saved you from. Come on! Wake up! You've got a choice to make: It's either grace, Jesus, and me . . . or it's the Judaizers, a long set of rules to follow, and constant guilt because you don't measure up. There's no in between. Pick one or the other, but you'd better pick wisely. Everything depends on your response."

The Pharisees of Jesus' day, the Judaizers in Galatia, and some people around today mistakenly think that they can earn God's acceptance by following enough rules. Of course, the rules they promote are the ones they do pretty well. Here are some conversations we might overhear:

"Do not murder." Check. I haven't killed anybody in weeks.

"Don't commit adultery." Got it. I'm not like *those* people. (But there is that uncomfortable passage in the gospels about lust being comparable to adultery [Matthew 5:27-30]. I'd rather not think about that.)

"Go to church." Well, how often? Every week? A couple of times a month? Yeah, that's good enough.

"Have no other gods." Well, sure. I don't have any statues around my house. Oh, so you're saying that "gods" aren't always

statues? If they include success, pleasure, and approval, I've got a problem because I spend far more time pursuing those things than God.

"Don't covet." Oh, come on. Nobody can follow that one. I wish I had a nicer car, a bigger house, a better vacation, a more pleasant spouse, a better body, a higher title, and on and on. Let's move on.

And here's the last one, the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do to you." So you're asking me to spend a day, maybe six hours, or even just one hour selflessly, passionately, creatively, and tirelessly meeting the needs of others. Oh, man, I'm not sure I can make it five minutes!

People who try to win acceptance with God and others by following rules have to define which rules and determine how much is good enough. If they even take a glance at their hearts, they quickly see that their motives and secret desires are, at best, mixed. The gospel of Christ never gives us rules as a way to earn God's love, but only as a tool to show us how much we desperately need God's outrageous grace. If we try to follow the rules without grace, we become arrogant and resentful or oppressed by guilt, but if we let the unconditional love and forgiveness of God flood our hearts, we realize we are worth more to God than the stars in the sky, the oil in the ground, and all the

The gospel of Christ never gives us rules as a way to earn God's love, but only as a tool to show us how much we desperately need God's outrageous grace.

diamonds the world has ever produced—not because we’ve earned this status, but only because it’s a free gift from the hand of God.

If Paul were writing you and me today, what would he say? I have a hunch that he might say a lot of the same things to us he said to the Galatians. Why? Because it’s so easy for us to begin strong in God’s magnificent grace and then drift back to rules to define our spiritual lives. Living by a set of rules (whoever makes the list) can seem more attractive than God’s grace for two reasons: They’re visible and measurable, and they make us feel good when we meet them. But they always result in spiritual, emotional, and relational poverty—arrogance or shame—instead of gratitude, joy, and affection for God.

“LESS THAN”

In some way and to some degree, all of us feel like misfits. Personal sin and radical insecurity are parts of the human condition. The only people who don’t have occasional pangs of conviction and self-doubt are sociopaths—who are the ultimate misfits. We may be skilled academically, athletically, physically, verbally, or professionally, but no amount of success can keep the demons of doubt at bay. We secretly wonder what it’ll take next time to win applause, laughs, or hugs. We hope we can do enough to be acceptable to God and to those around us, but we secretly fear that our character flaws and failures will leave us out in the cold.

Every aspect of public life works by creating insecurity. Educators give grades and threaten failure or loss of a scholarship. Politicians try to convince us that “the other guy” is a bum and

should be thrown out. Many families run on manipulation, rationalization, and denial instead of honesty and love. They seldom admit it, but they're trying to keep people off balance so they can control them. I actually know a pastor whose stated leadership philosophy is "keep them off balance." If anyone feels too comfortable, he shakes him up because his goal is to create insecure followers. Why? So they'll need him. The most pervasive and powerful force that fosters insecurity in our culture is advertising. It's so common that we don't even notice its effect. How does a company sell toothpaste? By convincing us that its product will not only clean our teeth, but also that whiter teeth and fresh breath will enable us to win friends. Virtually every ad has a surface promise and a subtle, yet powerful hidden promise. The surface promise is that toothpaste will clean your teeth, but the hidden, seductive promise is that this tube of goo will provide the relationships you've longed to enjoy. Without this brand of toothpaste, you run the risk of a meaningless, lonely existence!

Apple is the king of upgrades. I'm amazed at the skill of its advertising strategy. No matter how happy I am with my current Apple computer, I can't wait until the next model comes out. This isn't just an imaginary thirst for more and better computing power. When I go through the scanner at the airport, common, everyday laptops get no attention at all, but if someone sees my Mac laptop, he often says, "Is that the new one? Man, I love those Macs." I always want to be able to say, "Yep, it's the latest model." I don't want to be mortified by having to say, "Uh, no. It's the older version, but I hope to get the new one soon." I'm a willing victim of

Apple's intentional upgrade approach. I know it's a strategy, but I still give in to the pressure.

Modern advertising is purposely designed to create discontent so we'll buy a product or use a service to meet our now obvious need. An ad is successful if it makes us feel insecure. It promises us an ideal life of beauty, popularity, riches, power, and comfort, but its idealism is hollow. It drives us to spend money on things—often things we don't even need. It creates insecurity and then promotes products and services to resolve that gnawing feeling of being “less than.” Ads in printed media and on billboards, television, and radio want to convince us that we simply have to have a better car, a bigger boat, nicer clothes, a faster computer, better seats at the ball game, a tastier hamburger, a more luxurious vacation, a cooler tattoo, and virtually everything else under the sun that companies want to market and sell. Companies that promise security, like financial services companies, include the implicit threat of ruin or shame if we don't use their services. In some cases, the money pumped into marketing a product is far more than the production cost of the item being sold, so the cost doubles because of the massive ad budget. That's how important and powerful advertising is in our culture.

We have an innate quest for meaning and security. When we feel insecure, however, we often go in the wrong direction in a vain pursuit. We try to fill our lives with things, pleasure, sex, drugs, success at work, sports, beauty, or anything else that promises to fill the hole in our hearts. When I was a kid, my deep, gnawing insecurity didn't push me into drugs, alcohol, or premarital sex.

Instead, I tried to win approval through the power of humor. To some degree, my efforts were successful—I became more popular—but at a staggering cost of even greater insecurity because I never really knew if the people who laughed loved my great lines or me. (Actually, I knew they'd drop me like a hot rock if I wasn't funny—a realization that kept driving me to be as funny as I could possibly be, no matter who was the brunt of my jokes.)

Insecurity isn't the real culprit; our wrong solutions to our feelings of self-doubt cause the problems. If our insecurity has driven us to the love, forgiveness, and acceptance of God, it has been a wonderful and constructive path in our lives. But far too often, we take the wrong fork in the road. We try to fill our lives with anything but God and experience devastating effects. Let me describe a few wrong paths:

We try to escape the painful feelings.

We use television, drugs, alcohol, sex, work, pornography, food, gambling, and other substances and behaviors to numb the pain and provide some stimulation to an empty life. We do whatever it takes to escape the hurt. Strangely, some people cut

When we feel insecure, however, we often go in the wrong direction in a vain pursuit. We try to fill our lives with things, pleasure, sex, drugs, success at work, sports, beauty, or anything else that promises to fill the hole in our hearts.

themselves to relieve pain. Their explanation is that the pain they feel from the knife or razor takes their minds off the more searing pain of abuse or abandonment. Some kids and adults play video games for endless hours each day to fill the inner void. If they can keep their minds busy, they don't have to think about the emptiness gnawing at them. Through pornography (now, increasingly for women as well as for men), people want to feel some sense of connection with people they don't know and can't touch because they feel disconnected from the people they are around every day. In countless ways, people try to escape their painful emotions.

We please people so they'll accept us.

We look in the faces of people each day, and we long to see them smile at us. To win their approval at home, at work, and in our friendships, we carefully craft our words and actions to suit them. These people become our mirrors. The look on their faces tells us that we're either safe and secure, detestable, or even worse, not worth their time to even notice us. Our identity is wrapped around their smiles or frowns. Some of us have become "hyper-vigilant," carefully listening to others' voice inflections and watching for the slightest change in facial expressions so we can alter our behavior to please them. Only if they smile, do we feel secure, but even then, we wonder, *What about next time?*

We're driven to achieve.

Some of us are driven to succeed at all cost. In business, academics, sports, cooking, and anything else we attempt, we have to be on top. We may want to prove to others that we belong in an

organization, or we may be proving to ourselves that we can make it. Some of us are determined to convince others they're wrong about us. They predicted we'd fail, and our attitude is, "I'll show them!" When winning is in the center of our identity, we end up using people as the next steppingstone instead of loving them for who they are and helping them succeed.

We hide and wear disguises.

When I felt so lonely in junior high, I retreated to the safety of books. I knew they couldn't hurt me, and they gave me momentary pleasure. Later, I tried a very different tactic. I transformed myself into a comedian and wore a mask to cover my true identity, all day, every day. People hide by withdrawing to their bedroom, or they hide in plain sight behind a phony identity. They try to project a confident, secure, untouchable façade, but that's all it is: a shell of a person. We want to convince people we're capable and happy, but we're dying inside. Sadly, some people go into marriage wearing a mask instead of being authentic. When the real person surfaces sooner or later, it's a shock to the spouse and sometimes destroys the marriage. The loneliest people are those who hide behind masks. They long for people to love them for who they are, but they're too afraid to let anyone know them. Somewhere in the past, they concluded, *If people really knew me, they wouldn't like me.* If we wear a mask long enough, we may get to a point when it becomes fused to our faces and we don't know who we are anymore. At that moment, we feel completely lost, but our loneliness is coupled with confusion and hopelessness.

We change the standards so we can meet them.

Some people try to meet a set of expectations—their own or someone else’s—but when they fail, they simply change the rules so they can meet them. This is done in our schools, elevating grades so that almost everyone makes an A. This is also done in parenting. I’ve talked to parents who have given up on training their teenagers to be responsible young adults. Instead of being diligent to impart values and holding their kids to honorable behavior, these parents offer plenty of excuses for their children’s misbehavior: “Everybody’s doing it.” “It doesn’t hurt anybody.” “I don’t want to be judgmental.” “He’ll grow out of it.” For most of us, the standards we set for ourselves and our families have been crafted by watching someone we respect. However, when these standards prove hard to reach, we find someone else to copy, someone with lower expectations and looser standards. There’s nothing wrong with finding someone to emulate. Paul told the church in Corinth, “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). The essence of the Christian faith is “keeping our eyes on Jesus.” The problem is that most of us keep our eyes on someone else.

We simply give up.

Some people have tried so long, failed so often, and felt so helpless that they’ve simply throw in the towel and given up on life. They’ve concluded, *I am what I am, and I’ll never be able to measure up*. A deep, poisonous sense of shame whispers to them a thousand times a day, *You’re nothing, and nobody cares about you*.

They try to fill their day with entertainment or mindless activities so they don't have to think and feel—because thinking reminds them of their failures and their emotions are so pervasively painful. People simply can't live without at least a kernel of hope. Hope is “a happy anticipation of a desired future.” It only takes a little to give us the energy and direction we need to take steps forward each day. We aren't selectively depressed. When we give up in one area of our lives, it affects every other part.

THE PARADOX OF GRACE

The gospel of Christ is inside out and upside down. Jesus welcomed the ones who were outside—misfits, tax collectors, prostitutes, children, the lame, and the blind. But the religious insiders—the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the religious elite—were left out because they were too arrogant to admit their need for a Savior. God's grace is the most magnificent gift the world has ever known, but we have to admit our emptiness in order to be filled with it. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God put the condition of the human heart this way:

*“My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,*

God's grace is the most magnificent gift the world has ever known, but we have to admit our emptiness in order to be filled with it.

*and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (Jeremiah 2:13).*

We’re all thirsty for love and purpose, but too often, we drink from “broken cisterns” of applause, prestige, comfort, and clout instead of the only drink that really satisfies. Jesus has an answer to our dilemma. John paints the picture for us at a great festival in Jerusalem where each day’s events built to a crescendo:

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them” (John 7:37-38)

When we admit our lives are barren and all our efforts to twist God’s arm have failed, we’re ready to drink deeply of Jesus and be filled with the refreshing grace of God. We want it to pour over us, and we’re thrilled that Jesus loves us so much. Then, we can’t contain ourselves. We look around for someone to thank, and we find Christ. We look around for someone to serve, and we see our family, friends, and neighbors. When the outrageous grace of God fills our hearts, we want to honor Him in every way we can imagine. That’s the role of the law for believers—not to earn God’s love, but to be so filled with His love that it overflows from us to others.

People instinctively have two powerful goals: to find meaning in life and avoid pain as much as possible. All of our behaviors are designed to accomplish these objectives. Most people have only a glimmer of insight (if any at all) about the methods they use to

try to cope with their insecurities. The job of pastors, counselors, parents, and friends is to help people become self-aware so they can make better choices. But the hill is pretty high. People cling to their defenses for several reasons: It's all they've ever known, it has worked to some degree, and it always holds the promise of working next time. Change often comes only when they've tried everything to escape, please, achieve, or hide, but none of it is working any more. Now, they have to face the hard truth . . . which can be the best moment of their lives if they make the right choices. When I tried to wear a mask of being a comedian to impress people and win their approval, I created even more heartache within myself and more distance in my relationships. But when I found the courage to admit I was a misfit, I opened a door to God's grace, and honesty paved the way to far more meaningful relationships.

My junior high experience was very painful, but something lured me back to the school fifteen years later when I was a young adult. On a quiet summer afternoon, I drove up to the school, got out, and asked a janitor to let me go in and walk the halls. I went into the gym and looked at the place where I'd wrestled the big football player. I walked into Mr. Sellent's algebra class and stood next to my desk on the third row. The one in front of it was where Beth Grayson sat. In every room and down every hall, the memories and the emotions came flooding back. Suddenly, I felt like I was thirteen years old again. I collected myself and went back to my car. I got in and put my head on the steering wheel. I'd gained a lot of insight about myself during a decade and a half, but the

pain was as fresh and raw as it had been years before. I poured out my heart to the Lord, but I didn't pray, "God, heal this hurt in my heart." Yes, I know that's what most people pray, but instead, I prayed, "Lord, never let me forget how this feels. I want to remember this pain for the rest of my life so that I have compassion for other people like me—those who are misfits, unwanted, failures, rejected, and forgotten. Help me remember so I'll care for the people who matter to You and love them the way You love them. God, help me remember."

This was another pivotal point in my life. Sometimes, when I tell my story, a well-meaning person will come up to me and suggest, "Rod, you need to ask God to release you from your past." But I don't want God to release me from it. He has done incredible work to heal the hurts and use the pain to teach me lessons, but I never want to forget the pain. It's the fuel to enable me to care for people who believe no one will ever love them. Not long ago, a young girl asked to speak to me after I taught at a retreat. She poured out her heart and told me about her loneliness and confusion. I gave her a big hug and both of us cried. I knew how she felt, and even more important, she knew I knew how she felt. I didn't have to give her "ten principles to heal life's hurts." I only needed to be there and care.

MY HOPE FOR YOU

God has used Paul's letter to the Galatians in a powerful way in my life, and I hope He does the same for you. Before we dive into the three questions, we needed to first get a good grasp of

God's grace. Only then can we answer these questions appropriately. These three questions have become a grid for me. I ask them every day to remind me of what's most important, where my security is found, the source of my strength, and the way to relate to the people I love. I hope you'll use them this way, too.

As I grow stronger and deeper in God's grace, I see every day as a gift from Him. Instead of wading through an oppressive list of demands and expectations each day and striving—and failing—to meet them, I have a new motivation. Earlier in my Christian life, I didn't get it. I still thought I had to jump through enough hoops to win God's approval. It was oppressive. Now, as I let the grace of God fill my heart, I feel that wonderful blend of contentment and passion. I know God loves me and accepts me unconditionally, and this realization spurs me to please Him all day, every day.

At the end of each chapter you'll find some questions to help you think and pray about what you've read. I encourage you to take plenty of time with these. It's not a speed drill, so if you want to think long and hard about a particular issue, stay there as long as you want. It'll be worth the effort. These questions are also designed to be used in classes and groups to stimulate discussion. I trust God will use this book to melt you with His love and mold you to become the person He wants you to be.

CONSIDER THIS . . .

1. Do you think everybody (perhaps secretly) feels like a misfit? Why or why not?
2. What are some of the measuring sticks people use to help them figure out if they're acceptable? What are some of the measuring sticks you use? Which of these seem to offer the most promise?
3. What are some ways people use the word "grace"? Which of these are on track with the gospel's definition? Which ones fall short?
4. Read Galatians 1:6-9. Do you think Paul is too harsh in his words and tone? Explain your answer.

5. Of the ways people try to cope with life when they feel “less than,” which ones are most common among people you know? Which ones have you used? What were the results?

6. How would you explain “the paradox of grace”?

7. At this point in your life, are you thrilled with the grace of God, or do you secretly (or not so secretly) still hope you can do enough to measure up and earn God’s approval? What are some ways people can measure what they really believe about grace?

8. What do you hope to get out of this book?





