

Everyday Grace

INFUSING ALL YOUR RELATIONSHIPS
WITH THE LOVE OF JESUS



JESSICA THOMPSON



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To my Cody

Your commitment to love me through it all is astounding.
You reflect the way Christ loves the church. I love you.

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Foreword

If there's one commodity in this world that's rare, it's got to be grace. Let's face it, we all live in a quid pro quo world, a world in which we're taught to believe that "what goes around comes around." We're entranced by "pay it forward" scenarios, hoping that perhaps in the future someone will pay it forward for us.

Although these sayings seem modern, the truth is that they aren't; in fact, they've been with us since Adam and Eve first believed the lie that they should trample on each other as a way to achieve godhood. And when they did that, they not only turned our thinking on its head but also turned us in on ourselves, a condition Martin Luther described five hundred years ago with the Latin phrase *incurvatus in se*. Yes, even then, men and women, boys and girls were self-focused, curved in on themselves, and chained to the belief that their desires were ultimate and that all of their relationships, with both God and man, exist primarily to satiate their craving for preeminence. We're no different. So we construct self-focused ways to motivate people to live as they should. But this kind of living isn't for God or even for our neighbor; it's primarily for ourselves, so that we can demand from others what we want and approve of ourselves at the end of the day.

It's into this desperate world that God speaks the word *grace*. Rather than repaying us as our sins deserve, he poured out all his wrath on his perfect Son and granted to us all the blessings he had earned in a life of complete faith and love. Traditionally, grace has been defined as "God's riches at Christ's expense," and it is that. We get his riches. He gets our wrath. Nothing in Christ's life or death has anything at all to do with *quid pro quo*. Certainly what went around from him didn't come to him . . . at least not before the resurrection. If there was ever any man who was not curved in on himself it was Jesus. And yet, because of grace, he agreed to pay it forward to us even as he cried in agony on Golgotha's mount.

And this grace, this amazing commodity, is the only medicine powerful enough to turn us away from ourselves and toward others. It is only by grace that we will experience the renewal and resurrection of our relationships. It is only as we see how we've been loved and welcomed despite our sin that we are able to love and welcome other sinners.

Of course, there are plenty of books out there that tell you how you should pay it forward so that you can get what you want from your relationships. But these schemes will ultimately leave you empty because you'll still be the same old *incurvatus in se* you and you'll wonder why no one else is working as hard as you are while watching the whole thing come crumbling down under the weight of your demandingness. It's simply impossible to be freed from measuring how others are responding to our love when we live under the creed of "what goes around comes around." You don't need steps to better relationships or rungs on a ladder, you need a Rescuer. And, gloriously, that's just what you've been given.

So it is with great joy that I recommend this book to you. Of course, I could tell you to read this book because my dear daughter and dear friend, Jessica, wrote it, and I'm her mom. I

could tell you to read this because I have watched her life and have seen it overflow with grace time and time again with her family, her friends, her church . . . yes, even with her mom. But I'm not telling you to read this book because I love Jessica; I'm telling you to read it because she gets grace and how it plays out in our relationships and that it is only the deep, sweet, refreshing, mind-boggling truth of God's grace that will enable and empower you to love your neighbor as yourself. She knows that all of our schemes to be loved are forever swallowed up in this truth: *Jesus loves me, this I know.*

So, let that precious reality infect and inform all your thoughts, and soon, without noticing it, you'll become kinder and more loving. Why? Because you've been loved. This is the message you'll find here . . . and I'm so happy about it.

—Elyse Fitzpatrick

Acknowledgments

*M*y mind is weak. I sit down to write these acknowledgments fully aware that I am going to forget some very key people. So if you are reading this hoping to see your name and it isn't here, I am sorry. I have had too much chocolate today and not enough brain food and other various excuses.

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Introduction

A FEW NOTES BEFORE YOU START

After I ran a quick search on Amazon for “Christian Relationship Books,” I was stunned to find over twenty thousand results. Over twenty thousand books on relationships from a Christian worldview are for sale right now. This is a staggering number—and, yes, I realize I am just adding to it—but let me tell you why this book will be different from the majority of books out there on relationships. I don’t have a bunch of great advice. Now, before you start wondering, *Why in the world did I buy this book?* let me tell you why I think this is good news. It’s good because as Christians, we don’t *need* any more relationship advice! Those twenty thousand “Christian Relationship Books” can give you advice on how to be a better wife, mother, daughter, friend, employee, and so on. There are experts from every field who can tell you exactly how to maximize your influence, or build a legacy, or make your children excel, or have the best marriage on the block. Those might all be fine and may actually work—for a time.

The problem, however, is that while *you* may be following all of the right steps to a better relationship, it doesn't mean your spouse or your friend is. And if we're honest with ourselves, how many of us can even follow all the right steps in any book? For the most part, we know what to do in relationships: Be loving, give unselfishly, don't get angry . . . and on and on. And yet, here you find yourself reading another book (and me writing it!) on how to have better relationships. Why is there such a breakdown? If we all want good relationships, and generally speaking we have a pretty good idea of what to do in a relationship, why is there so much brokenness?

The point of this book is not to give you a push in the right direction. We need more than a push. We need to be made *alive*. My hope is that this book will bring life to your soul. But first, we have to diagnose the real problem.

Since I am a woman, I will be primarily addressing women in this book. But we all know that relationship difficulties are not strictly a female problem. They are a human problem. So occasionally I will also talk to the men who might be reading or listening. I would encourage my female readers to share and discuss these thoughts with the men in their lives as well, or invite them to read the book for themselves.

Lastly, I need to say at the outset that I don't have all my relationships perfectly together. I experience brokenness just like every single person reading this book. My goal is to be brutally honest with you about my own relationships. I don't want you to think for one minute that I am a relationship expert, because I am not. I wholeheartedly agree with Martin Luther and say about myself that "I am just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."



1

The Problem With Us

*J*anet Jackson had a pop hit in the '80s that sums up how most of us view our relationships. The chorus repeats over and over, “What have you done for me lately?” She asks this question because the answer provides her relational guidelines. That is, for Ms. Jackson (and often for you and me, if we’re honest), “You do for me, I will do for you” is the religion of the day. You be a good husband to me, I will be a good wife to you. You be a faithful friend to me, I will be a faithful friend to you. You preach the way I like it and appreciate my gifts, I will stay at your church. You be a good father or mother, I will be a respectful child. You be a good child, I will be a nice mother. If you don’t do what you are supposed to do, then that releases me from my obligation to love you, and I can do whatever I want to do. This mind-set is not just a sign of our own times, of course. It was been around a long time and was at one time referred to as “Ka me, ka thee.” *Ka* means “to serve.” You serve me, I will serve you. Sir Walter Scott, a nineteenth-century Scottish

novelist and poet, once wrote, “Ka me, ka thee, is the proverb all over the world.”

“What have you done for me lately?” I often feel that if I am not looking out for myself and my interests, no one will. And while Janet Jackson describes how we feel toward each other, the intro to the TV show *My Name Is Earl* describes how we feel toward God. In this intro, Earl gives a monologue saying that he was a terrible person. He describes how whenever something good happened to him, something bad would immediately follow. He calls this *karma*. He says he finally learned his lesson and decided to make a change in his life. He concludes, “So I made a list of everything bad I’ve ever done and one by one I’m gonna make up for all my mistakes. I’m just trying to be a better person.”

We often live with God by the rule of karma, as Earl defines it,¹ trying to make up for all the wrongs we have done. I think if I can just make up for it, if I can just do better, then God will take care of my needs, all the while forgetting that he has actually already taken care of every need I truly have. This question of “What have you done for me lately?” in relationship is a sure lack of belief that God is faithful and will provide all that I need. I think if I do my part and work hard, everybody else had better do their part and work hard too. I can’t leave it up to God. I must take care of things myself. The problem with this thinking is that in reality I don’t really work hard at my relationships. So often I am self-focused, worried about my own needs and desires, instead of being “genuinely concerned” for the welfare of others (Philippians 2:20).

An attitude of “you give to me because I give to you” is terribly exhausting. First of all, I never live up to my own expectations. I am never really the friend, spouse, parent that I want others to be. This results in a pulling up of the bootstraps and trying

harder. Second, not only do I fail, others fail me. So if I am looking to others for my own happiness, satisfaction, security, or acceptance, I will constantly be disappointed and angry. Truly my only source of joy can be my God, who never disappoints me and is the only one who perfectly relates.

With this mind-set, you and I go trudging through everyday relationships. And yet we long for something else. We long for a love that gives its all to us. We are taught very early through childhood fairy tales that there is that special someone out there just for you, and he or she will change your entire life. They will love you regardless of what you do or don't do. In fact, as soon as they see you, they will know you are the one for them. As we grow up, we find that this idealistic relationship isn't really out there . . . or maybe we just haven't found it yet. So we go to romance novels, soap operas, or romantic movies and look there for the love we want. We see it portrayed on the screen, or on the pages of the book we are reading, or in the lyrics to our favorite song, and we can't understand why we can't have that same love. We start to redouble our efforts with our loved ones. We go back to our *ka me, ka thee* ideal and think, "If I just work harder at being a better (you fill in the blank), they will be better too. If I do more, I will get more back."

The truth is we don't want *ka me, ka thee* or *karma*, even though we think we do. The gospel refutes this idea completely. It is anti-karma and pro-grace. The gospel says that even though you aren't good enough now and actually never will be good enough in your own good works, I am going to give to you anyway. The gospel tells us that all we have earned has been given to the Son and all the Son has earned has been given undeservingly to us. If we try to rely on karma to see us through, it will be an endless life of working never to obtain. If we rest our souls in the

gospel, our lives will be full of receiving, even though we could never work hard enough to receive the gift we have been given.

Our reality is one of brokenness. Our reality is one where we fight with our parents, yet still long for a safe place to call home. Our reality is that we are sinfully impatient and angry with our kids when they don't get in the car quickly enough, and then we feel guilty for the way we've treated them. Our reality is that we are jealous of our friends for their other friendships, and yet hate that we feel that way. Our reality is that we are angry and demanding with our spouses, all the while wondering why we can't love and be loved the way we have seen in books, movies, and TV.

Recently, I have heard from two different friends who are experiencing hurt in a relationship. One is feeling unappreciated by a dear friend to whom she has given so much. At the same time, she also feels guilty that maybe she isn't doing enough for this friend. The guilt she is feeling has convinced her that since she hasn't done enough, her friend doesn't appreciate her. The other friend is dealing with deep and complicated feelings of hurt and confusion toward her parents. She grew up with an abusive father and a mother who enabled him and didn't defend her children. Yet my friend still tried to repair the relationship. Even so, her parents dismissed her attempts and severed the relationship even further by denial, and then in turn accused her of not being the daughter she should be.

We each have our own stories like the two above. We all have tales of broken relationships. I am sure most of us can think of at least one relationship that we feel regret over. We wish things could have been different or could be different now. What is our hope? What is our help? How can we, as sinners, live with and love other sinners?

Our increasingly self-centered society tells us to love only those who are worthy, those who earn our love, those who prove

themselves. And likewise, we are only worthy to be loved if we have proven ourselves. Most people in our modern world hum along with Janet Jackson and nod their heads in agreement with Earl: *I will do better, be a better friend, and surely they will be better and God will bless me.* The gospel obliterates both of these ideas. Concerning relationship, the gospel says:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:6–8

How radically life-changing would it be to live in the truth of this freedom every day? How life-changing would it be for your relationships if you didn't live with crushing expectations hanging over your loved ones' heads?

All of us know the white-hot gaze of a loved one we have disappointed. My siblings and I used to call that specific look from our mother the “Fish-Eye.” (*Uh-oh, Mom's giving you the Fish-Eye. . . . You better knock that off or Mom will give you the Fish-Eye. . . .*) There's a good reason for this odd name—think about when a dead fish is floating on the water and there's that one eye fixed on you in an unrelenting gaze, asking, *Why didn't you feed me today or all last week? Or, Why did you think it would be fun to dump the entire bottle of fish food in this tank, huh?* I myself have perfected this look with my own children. I don't have to say a single word and they can feel my disappointment. Oh, for a change in my heart that I would be able to see their sin and give a look of grace instead—a look of understanding.

When you and I can come to the depths of our sinfulness without trying to cover ourselves, without thinking that God is looking at us with a disappointed gaze, that is when we will be able to love without any thought of ourselves at all. We are a performance-based people, which is completely ironic, because our performance every day is far less than perfect. We live in performance-based relationships. “What have you done for me lately?” You love me and *then* I’ll love you. Again, if we could only see the hypocrisy in this, since we don’t *ever* love the way we should love. We know this is true, so we hide behind “trying harder,” or we avoid the truth by filling our minds and hearts with the numerous ways that others have failed.

There is, however, wonderful hope. We’re not doomed to lives full of miserable ka-me-ka-thee-based relationships.

Our hope in relationship is Jesus. Our joy in relationship is remembering how graciously he has loved us. As funny and counterintuitive as this sounds, our relationships cannot be about us; they must be about him. As our gaze turns from how we should be treated to how we’ve been treated by the One who has every right to cast judgment, then we will know true and intimate fellowship. All of us long for relationships that are fulfilling and loving, but the problem is that we are looking for them in the wrong places. We already have the relationship we all desire. We don’t need to use each other anymore to feel loved and wanted; we don’t need to look to others to build our self-esteem. We look to Christ alone, who has loved the unlovable, accepted the unacceptable, and given us exactly what we don’t deserve. This love will revolutionize our relationships.

The Beatles had it right when they said, “All you need is love.” Unfortunately, the love they were talking about was supposed to be found in each other. Beloved, there is no hope in finding the love you desire by looking to each other. You are truly loved

unceasingly, unquenchably, and irrevocably now. Let God's love fuel your love for others.

I know this sounds like a utopian idea, spiritual-sounding words that have no *oomph* behind them. Right about now you may be saying, "Great! So what? What exactly do I need to do to let his love fuel me? How does God's love for me in Christ help me to love my brother who is an alcoholic and won't talk to me?" My hope is that while we journey together through this book, you will find that our Savior's love is the only thing that can change the way you relate to others. As you see that Christ calls you his friend (John 15:15), you will be able to love your friends without expectation of finding a perfect friendship because that perfect friend is already yours. You will be able to love those who are outside of your little circle of friends because Jesus loved you even though you were outside of his circle. As a matter of fact, you were his enemy. You will be able to be unselfish with your friends, because your identity doesn't come from who is standing next to you, but rather who has laid down his very life for you. You won't be continually worried about what your friends think of you, because you will have heard and believed his word of grace and acceptance toward you.

As you see that God calls you his bride (Ephesians 5:25–27), you won't look to your earthly spouse to fulfill all your desires to be loved unconditionally, to be known perfectly, and to be dealt with patiently, because you already have all of those things in Christ. He calls you his bride. He loves you as you long to be loved. He knows every intimate detail about you. He prays for you continually. The more your heart steepes in this truth, the freer you will be to love your spouse even when he or she fails you. You won't have to keep a record of their wrongs, because you will remember that Christ has irrevocably canceled your record of

wrongs. You will be able to love them when they don't love you back because Christ's love for you never stops, never gives up.

These truths and more are the only solution for our brokenness. Although we won't ever be the perfect friend, spouse, parent, or employee, we can know that we have the perfect Father, Groom, Brother, Friend, and King! Such knowledge will allow us the freedom to love others without thinking, "*What have you done for me lately?*" We will be released to love with only Christ in mind, and this will revolutionize our relationships.