

Swallow GRACE and Sweat MERCY

GORDON ATKINSON

We live in a highly marketed society. Politicians, commercials, and various organizations all use marketing in one form or another. The idea behind marketing is to say something good about yourself or your product. Quite often what you say is not true, but that's unimportant. What is important is what people believe about you. If people believe this good thing that you've said, they will elect you or buy your products.

It's all words, you see. All words and no flesh, no real living. But words are often good enough in our world.

A downside to this way of life is that words can lose their meaning over time. People have heard things like "stupendous" and "extra-strength" and "guaranteed" so often that they stop listening to them. The words get lost in a sea of meaningless jabber. Eventually the marketers are forced to retire worn-out phrases and invent new ones that we haven't heard before.

I believe a very important word in Christian theology and life has been lost in just this way. Lost in a sea of religious language and church marketing hype. That word is grace. Grace describes the idea of receiving the love of God despite the fact that you do not

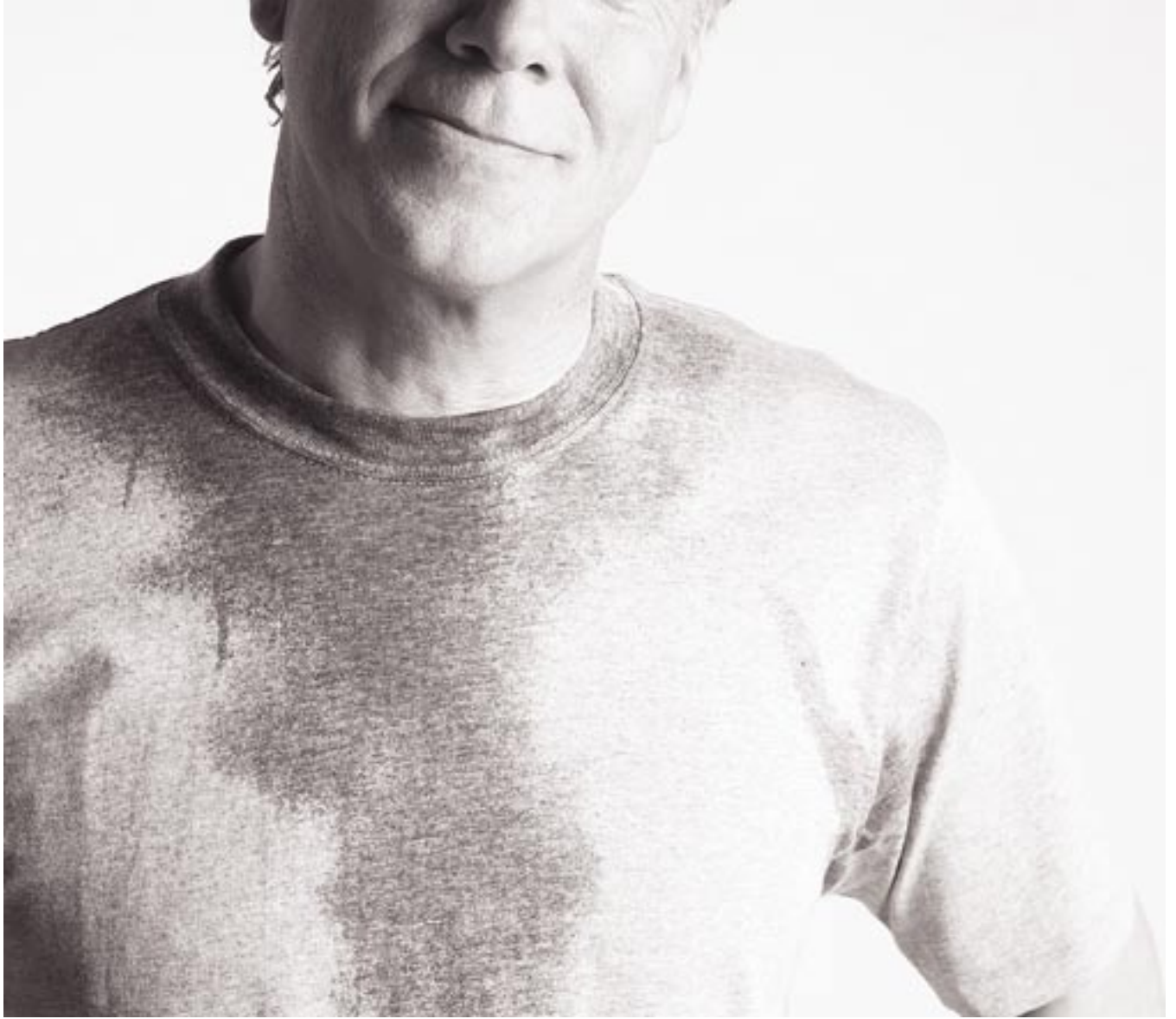
deserve it. Grace cannot be earned, it can only be humbly received.

There is a very popular Bible verse from Ephesians that Christians are fond of quoting. "By grace you have been saved through faith...not the results of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

People in church talk about grace all the time. You hear it in the foyer and in every Sunday-school class. It is a word you often hear in hymns and sermons. It gets mouthed and written and tossed about in Bible studies until we hardly notice it anymore.

Christians say that we "believe in grace," though we don't always know what we mean by that. Perhaps we say this because we know we are supposed to say it. It's something we talk about so that we will appear to be theologically correct. Unfortunately, many of us do not take the time to consider what it would mean to live a grace-filled life. We know the word *grace*, but we haven't swallowed the idea behind it. We haven't internalized grace. Grace is not in our guts.

You can tell when Christians have not swallowed grace because they live ungracefully. They continue to act as though they must earn the love of God by being good people. Of course, no one can be good all the time, so these



people are often guilt-ridden, frustrated, and angry. It's only a matter of time before they turn that anger toward others and begin making accusations and judgments about the people around them.

That's what I mean when I say living in an ungraceful way. It's a hard, angry, and judgmental way to live. And this kind of judgmental living is very damaging to the reputation of Christ's Church. The people of our world notice the disconnect between our words and our lives.

Now there is a foolproof method for determining if someone has swallowed the idea of grace and truly come to believe in God's unconditional love. For you see, a person who has swallowed grace will always sweat mercy.

There is an interesting and sometimes inconvenient truth about the system of perspiration that cools the human body. Sweat can take on the

odor of what we eat or drink.

A friend of mine went to a nice Italian restaurant with his bride on their honeymoon. He consumed a large plate of food without realizing that there was a lot of garlic in it. *A lot* of garlic. That evening he and his new wife noticed that he reeked of garlic. This would make anyone unhappy, but to a man on his honeymoon it was particularly distressing.

He showered repeatedly, but the minute his skin began to perspire, the smell would return. There was nothing he could do but wait until he had sweated all of the garlic out of his system. A decade later, this was a very funny story. At the time, neither he nor his wife were amused.

Grace, when swallowed and ingested, has a way of working itself out of our pores in the form of mercy. When people truly believe that God's love cannot be earned but is only given free-

ly and accepted in humility, they look at themselves and others in a new way. Mindful of how much grace and mercy God has shown them, they naturally show great mercy to others. They become merciful. It's not something they plan; it just happens to them. It comes out of their pores, you might say.

Jesus noticed this and tied the giving and receiving of mercy together quite nicely in the Sermon on the Mount.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7).

If your life doesn't bear the merciful fruit of the Holy Spirit, then you really don't believe in grace. You can say that you believe in grace, but with no mercy for others, your words will have no more credibility than a television commercial. □

Gordon Atkinson blogs at www.reallivepreacher.com and is the author of the book, *ReallivePreacher.com*. He lives in San Antonio, Texas.