

MAKE IT BETTER

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There is a teaching, an ideology, a culture, an extreme environmental worldview that views humankind as a blight upon the earth, and the sole source of all the world's problems.

Those who view the world through these lenses see humankind as bent on destroying the planet and themselves with it. They see *all other* creatures working in harmony with the universe, while humans simply take advantage of the earth's resources to spend them on their own narrow, short-sighted pleasures.

They consider animals to have equal or higher value than humans. United States Supreme Court Associate Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once remarked that, "I see no reason for attributing to man a significance different in kind from that which belongs to a baboon or a grain of sand." Really?

The environmental doomsday message is everywhere. You can't even watch a nice nature documentary without this omnipresent and oppressive message. In January 2013, David Attenborough, an internationally renowned host of nature documentaries, revealed his bent. Mankind, he warned, is a "plague on the earth." He said, "Either we limit our population growth or the natural world will do it for us." Nobody told him that world population growth is already slowing in nearly every part of the world. In many countries, demographers worry more about a shrinking population than an exploding one. How will such negative nonsense, guised as scientific knowledge, impact our impressionable children and grandchildren?

These extremists may be willing to take human lives in order to save animal lives (they are generally pro-abortion). Many more people simply prefer to live with animals rather than humans (One posted recently, "I have always said that animals are far more advanced than humans are."). I have to admit, the attitudes and behavior of some people help me see why they think that way.

The ideal of many seems to be a return to the Garden of Eden as vegetarians. Their motto is "Leave no footprints," or "Leave no trace." Here are some of the ways it shows up:



By the way, I agree wholeheartedly with the sentiment expressed in these signs, for it leaves the scenery just as beautiful for the next person as it was for you. Leave things just as they were.

Take a moment to think about some of the common traces of human traffic that might be left behind.

One extreme expression of this value makes certain parts of beaches off-limits to human foot traffic, as you see here:



I say, “If you want to see a pristine beach without a human footprint, or any mark of human existence, buy a postcard instead, and leave the real beaches for those who know how to enjoy them.” If you’ve ever walked barefoot in the sand, you know it’s an experience to be shared, not to be forbidden.

Apart from the extremes, I like the sentiment and the general objective to treat the world gently and respectfully. It is in keeping with God’s command to “cultivate and preserve” the earth (Genesis 2:15). We call it creation care.

But a world without any mark of humanity is not the world that God created, nor the reason He created humankind. As I recall, on the sixth day, after He created the first man and woman, God said, “It is *very good*” (Genesis 1:31). The very order of creation reminds us that God created the world *for* humanity—for them to steward (manage) and for them to enjoy.

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. (1 Timothy 6:17) Does anyone imagine that “to enjoy” is code for “to destroy”? Of course not.

But to thoroughly enjoy what God has created, you must learn to enjoy God Himself. While it is possible to enjoy the creation without knowing or enjoying its Creator, it is not possible to

enjoy it thoroughly, because what God has created is an expression and revelation of who God is. His true nature shines through His work.

There are two characteristics that shine through clearly. The more you look and contemplate the world around us, the more brightly they shine. One is grace; the other is generosity.

Grace

Grace is a wonderful word that expresses a superlative kindness. It may be that you initially encountered this word in relation to your salvation. *“By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

“Grace” translates the Greek *charis*, the root of which is the verb *to rejoice*. As a noun it refers to that which stimulates rejoicing—especially kindness, favor, and acceptance which is undeserved.

While *mercy* refers to *not receiving* what we deserve, as in forgiveness and deliverance from judgment for sin, *grace* refers to receiving what we *do not deserve*, as in extravagant kindness—our adoption as children of God.

A bumper sticker I have seen says, “Christians aren’t perfect, they’re just forgiven.” I appreciate the sentiment: God is not finished with us yet, we have not arrived at perfect behavior, but we have been forgiven for all our mistakes and foolishness. We’ve been acquitted, not perfected.

But one thing about that expression bothers me. It’s the word *just*. *Just forgiven* suggests “forgiven, and that’s all,” and that’s simply inaccurate and incomplete. Mercy forgives us, but grace gives us much more. We are not just forgiven—we are also reborn to eternal life, have passed from death to life, have escaped from judgment for our sins, have been adopted as God’s children, are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, are fully accepted in the presence of Almighty God, have been made priests of God, ambassadors of Christ, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ, are called the Bride of Christ, to share the glory of Christ, and will reign with Him, and enjoy His presence forever! That’s not nothing!

Paul calls it *“the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Grace expresses a favor done without expectation of return, and is therefore the absolutely free expression of the loving kindness of God. Its only motive is the bounty and benevolence of the God who gives it. It is unearned and unmerited favor.

God's grace not only forgives the repentant sinner, but brings joy and thankfulness to him. It changes the individual to a new creature without destroying his individuality.

If you look for it, grace shines through the created world. Unnumbered delights of sight and sound, of touch and taste, come to us, regardless of our deservingness. As it is written, "*He gives His sunlight to both the evil and the good, and He sends rain on the just and the unjust alike*" (Matthew 5:45). Everyone gets to enjoy a brilliant sunrise, if they want to. And everyone may benefit from a cleansing, nourishing rain.

Regrettably, the preponderance of these gifts of grace cause many to feel entitled, instead of grateful. Entitlement will eventually be disappointed, and that will give way to griping and bitterness. But the knowing recipients of grace find endless opportunities to give thanks to the One who has been so thoughtful and kind. Which describes you, the former grumpy one, or the latter grateful one?

Generosity

Generosity is a word familiar to all of us, but too often it is *not* associated with God (at least in connection with His goodness). Far too many people still hold to the view that the only thing God is generous with is judgment, while He is stingy with kindness. Most often, this is an emotional condition, rather than an intellectual position. Regardless of what we may say we believe, we *feel* like God is stingy toward us, because He doesn't give us what we want when we want it, or because bad things keep happening to us. We *feel* like others are more blessed and we always end up with the short straw.

The tragedy is this: that *feeling* can blind us to the many gifts of God's grace that we have received. We lose sight of the forest of His kindness that surrounds us, because of the individual trees of difficulty that are in our face.

Let's just consider two absurdly simple questions:

Is God stingy with the air that is so necessary for our survival? Is anyone, anywhere on earth, running out of air to breathe?

Is God stingy with sunlight, or water? We just returned from visiting Ireland, where they like to say, "It only rained twice last week; once for three days, and once for four days." And yet, at this time of year, many people don't wear raincoats or even carry umbrellas, because they can just duck into a doorway or a pub and soon the sunshine will return. Blue skies and rain are both an everyday occurrence.

The earth bears abundant nutrients, abundant metals, abundant water, and abundant crops.

More importantly, God is not stingy with His love, mercy, and wisdom. *“The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression”* (Numbers 14:18). *“In their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage. But You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them”* (Nehemiah 9:17). *“You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in mercy and truth”* (Psalm 86:15).

Leave It Better!

God doesn't say to His people, “Leave no trace.” Instead, He tells us to leave a trace, to leave our footprints everywhere: *“Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses”* (Joshua 1:3).

He doesn't tell us to leave things as we found them or as they were. He tells us to leave things better than they were! He calls us to change our world for the better.

Leave it better! Make it better!

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that *“[Jesus Christ] also brings a better promise from God that is based on better guarantees”* (Hebrews 8:6). We have a *better* promise than ancient Jewish believers had, based on *better* promises than could be found in the Law and the Prophets.

So we are to live a *better* life with God through our relationship with the Holy Spirit, and leave a *better* trail for others to follow.

God wants you to leave your mark in this world—apart from your discoveries or inventions, apart from your personal financial worth, apart from your status or reputation. Leave your mark of grace and generosity!

Be gracious, as your Father in Heaven is gracious. By intention—that is, on purpose, because you choose to—be patient, be kind, be forgiving, be forgetful of wrongs done to you, be mindful of those who have helped you to where you are today.

Don't let grudges or vindictiveness prevent you from leaving your mark. Be like Jesus. Don't just give people what they deserve—give them *more* than what they deserve. Because God has been gracious to you.

And, be generous, as your Father in Heaven is generous. Take the lead and be generous with your time and attention, be generous with your help, be generous with your money and your stuff. The more you open your heart and hand to others, the more God will open His heart and hand to you.

I'm sure you don't have all that you need or want in life, but "what's that in your hand?" You won't *start* being generous *after* you accumulate all you need or want (if such were even possible). You must develop generosity with what you have at present, or you will be fearful, grasping, and stingy for the rest of your life.

You do that by imitating God. Allow the Holy Spirit to prompt you to generosity.

Don't let fear of scarcity or envy prevent you from leaving your mark. Open up your heart and give from what you have, from what God has given you. Show that you trust Him to continue to provide for you. Practice being a sacrificial giver.

Be a Blessing

Is humanity a "blight and a cancer" on the earth? Only if we become the bottleneck that diminishes the abundant grace and generosity of God. God has left us here, with His Holy Spirit and His Word, to reveal the nature and character of the Savior, to be a blessing (not a blight).

For the last few weeks, you've been hearing that followers fish. That's true.

And believers leave things better. Make it so.