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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**January 5, 2014**

**Mere Belief...or Saving Belief?**

**Selected Scriptures**

**Prayer:** *Father God, we do thank you for your grace, we thank you that you are the source of our sustenance, you are the source of our power, you are the source of everything that we have in life. And Father, I just want to pray this day, this morning as this first Sunday of the new year as we open up your book, that you would give us grace, strength, wisdom, and power to see in your book by the power of your Holy Spirit your Son, the gift of your Son. Give us the grace to understand at a deeper level what it is he has done for us. Give us the blessing of understanding in a deeper level what we are to give to him. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, as I just said, it's the first Sunday of the month, it's the first Sunday of the year and this is the time that we remember Jesus Christ and his cross. And Jesus on the night before he died, he met with his disciples one last time to celebrate a Passover meal. *Matthew 26* describes it, it says this: *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave*

*it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." Jesus took bread and he took wine and he offered them up as symbols of his flesh and his blood and then he asked his disciples to eat the bread and drink the cup in order to symbolically eat his flesh and drink his blood. He then asked them to repeat the remembrance of this sacrifice on a regular basis, and this is what we call "the Lord's table." We celebrate it once a month by meditating on what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us on the cross, by examining ourselves, by asking God's Holy Spirit to point out to us areas in our own lives where he's convicting us of sin, by confessing our sins and then by participating in the elements. John 6:53 says: So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."*

Now we've been following the life of Jesus and thus far we've worked our way up to the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John, and if you remember where we were the last time, Jesus is once again, he's putting the Pharisees back again into their place. Over and

over and over again they had substituted their own rules, their own regulations, their own reputation for that of the true God and they had become so blinded in their wickedness that they openly mocked the very God that they claimed to be serving. We enter into John's gospel at the part of the dialogue where they're asking Jesus where his father is, suggesting that he was illegitimate. Jesus goes on to say in *John 8:19*: *"You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."* He then added: *"I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come."* So the Jews said, *"Will he kill himself since he says, 'Where I am going you cannot come'?"* He said to them, *"You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins."* So they said to him, *"Who are you?"* Jesus said to them, *"Just what I have been telling you from the beginning."*

See, the Pharisees wound up at the question that every one of us is going to wind up with when it comes to Jesus. That question is: *"Who are you?"* They came to that question dripping with sarcasm and scorn; it was far more of a statement than it was a question, and the question is actually better said, stated this way: *"You? Who are you?"* That's what they were saying. Now we can come to that question with our fists raised, with our bitterness disguised

as sarcasm or indifference but we're going to find out just like the Pharisees found out that we are never going to win when we are up against the King of the universe. A king who responds to the question "Who are you" by saying: *"Just what I have been telling you from the beginning. I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world that I have heard from him."* They did not understand that he had been speaking to him about the Father. So Jesus said to them, *"When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him."* As he was saying these things, many believed in him. Well, there's good news at the end of this, so to speak, the good news is many believed in him. That's verse 30. But the good news of verse 30 rapidly devolves into the bad news of verse 59 which is at the end of the chapter which says: *So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.*

So we ask how did that happen? How did this crowd who believed in him suddenly reject that belief so strongly that they wanted him dead? Well, Jesus had something to do with that. *John 8:31* says: *So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth,*

*and the truth will set you free."* You see what Jesus is doing here? Jesus is making a distinction, he's making the distinction between mere belief and saving belief. It is an absolutely critical distinction. Jesus is addressing those who already profess to believe in him and he's essentially telling them that such a belief is not enough. Anyone can say, "I believe in Jesus." "I believe in Jesus" can be no different than "I believe in democracy" or "I believe in free market capitalism." What Jesus encountered then and what still persists today, is that a great deal of what passes for Christian faith is in reality merely an assent to some Christian principles. See, there are evidently many in the crowd who liked what Jesus represented and who -- quote -- "believed" in him. You know, he was to them a leader, he was to them a philosopher, a religious teacher who could demonstrate some kind of miraculous power and perhaps show them this new way of thinking. Jesus did precisely that. But his words to mere believers indicated that mere belief was not nearly enough. See, Jesus didn't say, "If you agree with my word." He said, "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*" What does it mean to abide in God's word? Well, to abide in God's word means to stay, to remain, to endure patiently. It is to understand that God and his word is your center, it's your identity, it is your home. Jesus said as much in *John 14:23*, he said this: "*If anyone loves*

*me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me."* You see, the difference between mere belief and saving belief is not the difference between trying a little and trying a whole lot more. It's the difference between a hired hand and a son or a daughter. It's the difference between obeying because you have to and abiding because you want to. Jesus said: *"If you abide in my word, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

You see, when you abide in God's word, when you hunger for it like food, God opens to you the big story and you discover that his word accurately defines our very existence and it explains what it is we're doing here. We learn that from the fall of Adam, each of us was born slaves to a fallen nature that drives us like it did Paul, who said this in *Romans 7:18*. He said: *For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.* You see, because Paul abided in God's word, he knew he was a slave to the fallen nature he was born in, he knew that it drove him to do the evil that he hated and made him powerless to do the good that he wanted and that Christ had come to buy his freedom

by dying in his place. He knew that Christ's death having paid the debt in full had freedom to obey not because he now had to, but because filled by the Holy Spirit he now wanted to. *Romans 8:3* says: *For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. That's freedom. And Jesus offered the same freedom from slavery to mere believers. And because they were merely believers, they deeply, deeply resented the offer. They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham, and have never been enslaved to anyone, how is it that you say 'You will become free'?"* Now you might say how is it that a people who were enslaved for hundreds of years in Egypt could actually say they've never been enslaved to anyone? They seem to be blinded by what Jesus said. They considered Jesus' offer an insult. And to add insult to injury, Jesus next wipes out any distinction between Jew and Gentile by saying in verse 34: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*

You know, it's really an easy thing to see the mere believers who would attach themselves not to Jesus himself but to this idea of "a

manageable Jesus" as hopeless enemies of the kingdom. But you know, they're the very ones that make up the ministry, the mission field that you and I operate in. They'd be the very first ones to tell you that they're actually very big fans of Jesus and that Jesus had some wonderful things to say about life and love, but you can take his teachings only so far and you can take this kind of "born again stuff" way, way too far. Jesus always takes it way too far. See, the Pharisees deeply resented being told that they were slaves to sin. Well, so do the Smiths and the Joneses, and every other mere believer that we rub shoulders with. See, the fact is many truly saved believers more often than not were plucked by the grace of God from the ranks of mere believers. And those who fall in love with Jesus -- might well have been like me -- those who had previously hated him.

See, the mere believers in Jesus' day like the mere believers today, they couldn't handle the real Jesus. They just were not prepared to deal with someone whose truth was laser like in its projection and utterly fearless in its delivery. Jesus more often than not, he just goes right for the jugular. In verse 37 he says: *"I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."* Right off the bat Jesus is pulling the biological rug out from



under them saying a blood connection to Abraham means nothing since they have none of the love for the Father that Abraham had. And understand, Jesus was not being paranoid here. They really were looking to kill him. John's gospel in the seventh chapter says: *He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him.* So Jesus knows exactly who he is dealing with and the two different fathers that they both come from. And he tells them that he did precisely what he saw his Father do, and that they did what they heard from their father, the devil. Verse 39 says: *They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works that Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works the works your father did."* See, Abraham's children are not those who pass a DNA test. Abraham's children are the ones who do the works that Abraham did. Again, not because they have to but because God has done a work in their hearts, and because he's done a work in their hearts they now want to. And the work that Abraham did was this, *Romans 4:3: For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."* This is the work that separates mere belief from saving belief. It is placing your trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross and living out that trust.

As the elders begin distributing the bread, consider Jesus, consider Jesus calmly giving his Father's grace to those whose hatred is now growing more exposed by the minute. Consider the profound humility and the profound brilliance of Jesus. As the bread is being distributed, consider also this warning that God gives us in *1 Corinthians 11:28*: He says: *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.* I say this every month, I say communion is extremely serious business and to enter into it in an unworthy manner is to literally court disaster. If you're not absolutely confident that you are a child of the King or if you first need to be reconciled to your brother and sister before you bring your gift to the altar, pass the elements on, don't participate in them. I say it every month. Nobody's going to look at you like you're strange or odd. In fact, they may well think you're wise. But on the other hand, we also have to understand that we can make the mistake of thinking that unless we're spotlessly perfect we are unworthy to receive communion and that, too, is a mistake. You see, being a child of the King does not mean that we don't sin and

that we never fail, it means that when we do fail, we are aware that we have sinned. Why? Because we have God's Holy Spirit within us, convicting us, and so we grieve as children who know that we have a Father who longs to forgive us, who longs to cleanse us. God says in *1 John 1:9*: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* Being a child of the King does not mean that we are without sin. It means that when we do sin we understand we have an advocate with the Father. *1 John 2:1* says: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* And because we have Jesus Christ, the Righteous One and his righteousness, not our own, we are free to eat from his table. So if you love your Lord, don't deny yourself the privilege that Jesus purchased for you. Take a moment to consider what Jesus is telling us here today, and ask yourself this question: Mere believer or saved believer?

*1 Corinthians, chapter 11, verse 23* says this: *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* Take and eat.

As the elders begin distributing the cup, I want to repeat to you an old story that James Montgomery Boice told a long time ago about the difference between mere belief and saving belief. Boice told about an amazing tightrope walker who went by the name of Blondin. Blondin was born and grew up in France but he made his most spectacular daredevil exploits by crossing over Niagara Falls on a tightrope. He did this some time in the mid 1800's. He would cross a tightrope that was strung 1100 feet across Niagara Falls some 160 feet off the water, 16 stories, and he was so good at it, at one point he stopped midway and made himself an omelet just to the delight of the onlookers. On one occasion Blondin carried a person across the falls on his back. And he came back, and there was a large crowd and after he put that person down, he asked a person who was in the crowd watching, "Do you believe I could do that with you?" And the man said, "Of course! I just saw you do it." "Then hop on," said Blondin, "I'll carry you across." The man answered, "Not on your life." See, that's the difference between mere belief and saving belief. The difference between mere belief and saving belief is that saving belief involves a lot more than an assent to some facts. It means trusting your very life to Christ when he says "hop on." The good news for all of us is that Jesus is so incredibly gracious that he extends his offer frequently, exclusively to mere believers. *John 8:31* says: *So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are*

*truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* Jesus made that offer some 2,000 years ago knowing that it would not be well received, and that turned out to be an understatement. His offer led to another dialogue of the deaf between the mere believers and the one they claimed to believe in. And we know in the end they wound up picking stones up to kill him because in their case, mere belief was simply a pretense that only temporarily hid unbelief. Jesus still makes the same offer today. And it's amazing to think that he will accept mere belief as a place to start. Listen to what Charles Spurgeon once wrote of Jesus. He says this: "He has a quick eye for faith. He deals with little faith as we used to do with a spark in the tinder. In the days of our boyhood, when we had struck a spark, and it fell into a tinder, though it was a very tiny one, we watched eagerly, we blew upon it softly, and we were zealous to increase it so that we might kindle our match thereby. When our Lord Jesus sees a tiny speck of faith in a man's heart, though it be quite insufficient of itself for salvation, yet he regards it with hope, and watches over it, if, happily, this little faith may grow to something more. It is the way of our compassionate Lord not to quench the smoking flax, nor break the bruised reed."

Jesus isn't teaching in the temple right now. Instead, through his Holy Spirit he's speaking at a local church in Port Jervis on 25

Sullivan Avenue, and he's saying to those mere believers in this place, that if we too abide in his words, then we also will know the truth, and the truth will set us free. So I guess the big question for all of us is well, how do I know the difference between mere belief and saving belief? Well first, do I abide in Christ's words? *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* And so we ask ourselves is God and his word, is it my center? Is it my identity? Is it my home? And do I profess it openly? You know, I know it's become a cliché but one statement I've heard many, many times is if you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Jim Boice said this, "Some who are in our churches profess to be disciples of Christ, but you never know it until they tell you. You can know them for years and never observe a decision or an action that is distinctly Christian or never hear a distinctly Christian word. This is not being a disciple. Do not be a part time hit or miss believer. Be a thoroughbred."

And secondly we ask: Do you know the truth? Jesus says, *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* Is God's word something you know and you know that you know because God has supernaturally put his Spirit within you? You see, the mere believers that Jesus

ministered to, they were attracted to him but they were attracted because of the miracles and the crowds and the free food. Genuinely saved believers are attracted to Jesus because they know they can't live without him. You know, we begin every one of these communion services with this quote from *John 6:53*: *So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."* That is not a theoretical theological nicety to us. It is an absolute fact. We feed on Christ and his word or we die.

And thirdly, have I been set free? *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* See, the greatest impediment to freedom a mere believer has is blindness. It is his refusal to admit in the first place that he's a slave. Again, *John 8:33*: *They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"* It is the grace of God alone that opens one's eyes and allows him to see that what he thought of as freedom was anything but, and what he thought of as bondage was actually freedom indeed. I know I've shared this story numerous times, but it really bears repeating because it greatly illustrates what I'm trying to say. When I was living in San Francisco, I worked with a non-believer, and he frequently lamented to me what he claimed was the freedom that I had lost by

becoming a Christian. And one day we were working in his local neighborhood and so we decided to have lunch at his house, and I went up to his apartment and went into his kitchen and I noticed that around his kitchen table he had a huge stack of Playboy and Penthouse magazines. And he had just taken the mail in and I noticed that in with the mail was a brand new issue of Penthouse. Now, I'd only been a Christian for a few years and when I was in college, I'd be the first one to admit that Playboy and Penthouse were regular subscription items at our house. And by God's grace, I had now been completely free of them for a couple of years. And so we sat down to eat our lunch, and my friend looked at me and he said, "You can't even look at a Penthouse. What kind of freedom do you have?" And I looked at him, I said, "Well, you just got this issue and you haven't even opened it yet." I said, "My guess is that you don't have the freedom to not open it." So I challenged him by saying, "If you think you are as free as you say you are, then let me see you exercise that freedom by tossing that magazine out without even looking at it." And he looked at me for a second and then he looked at the magazine, and then he got a very wry grin on his face. It was a knowing grin. You see, he understood that right then and there, he realized he did not have the ability to not look at that magazine. In fact, we both realized it at the exact same moment. I said to him, "You tell me who's the one who's free and who's the one who's a slave?" That's the freedom that



Jesus has for us. Now, no one understood that better than John Newton who was a former slave trader himself, and what kept him a slave was his blindness to freedom. He said: "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." See, we mere believers who were blind, we receive our sight simply by asking. And so the questions we ask ourselves is have you been set free? Do you know the truth? Do you abide in his word? There's only one reason and one word for that if that's the case, and that word is "grace," and so we praise God for his amazing grace. Take a moment to do just that. 1 Corinthians, the 11th chapter, the 25th verse says: *In the same manner he also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."* Take and drink.

This is the part of the service that I call head, heart and feet. It's where we try to put some feet to what it is that we're doing when we remember Jesus Christ and his sacrifice. And I want to go back to something I said just a couple of minutes ago. As I said, I know it's a cliché, but I'd like you to think for a minute about getting arrested for being a Christian and the evidence that those folks would produce against you. Just ask yourself, would there be any evidence? You see, I'm someone who believes that things are going to get a lot dicier for Christians in the next few years, and

I think we need to be prepared. This recent dust-up with the Duck Dynasty leader, it had people outraged over how crude Phil Robertson was and how mean-spirited and bigoted he appeared to be. I read the quotes, and I found it very interesting that what the mainstream media labeled as "crude" was really a biological term that you could find in any high school textbook. What I think was astounding was the media's sudden concern for crudeness. I just wondered when that started. As for being mean-spirited and bigoted, the bottom line was that Phil Robertson was basically paraphrasing Paul's letter to the Romans and the Corinthians and folks didn't realize it, but their beef is not really with Mr. Robertson, their beef is with the author that Mr. Robertson was quoting, and that author is God. See, today it's Mr. Robertson's turn to be the subject of outrage and scorn; tomorrow it just might be yours. So the question that I'm asking this morning is are you prepared? And you know, instead of diving into the deep end of the pool, I'm just suggesting why not get your toes wet now? Why not get your toes wet now while the social risks that we are taking would only be social? Ask someone if you can share your faith with them. Perhaps you can use this Duck Dynasty controversy to describe the word of God and to defend it. Give a stranger a tract. We're getting new tracts in shortly thanks to Paul McCardel. You know, there's a book that I highly recommend, Nik Ripken's *The Insanity of God*, I think there's three copies still

downstairs, he was a missionary to Somalia, and he has some incredible wisdom to share with God's work amongst the persecuted church. And in that book he quotes a Chinese church leader who was commenting on a young Christian leader who was speaking at a conference which was forbidden, it was a hidden conference, they were all risking their necks to be there, but this one older church leader was listening to this younger church leader speak and this is what he said. He said, "He's going to be someone God can use in a powerful way someday, but you cannot trust what he says now. He hasn't been to prison yet. This was an attitude that I would encounter often in China. Personal trust and respect for spiritual maturity were often in direct proportion to the amount of suffering that had been endured for the faith. If someone had not yet experienced personal persecution and suffering, trust was withheld until that happened. What was perhaps most remarkable about that was the underlying assumption that the suffering and persecution would inevitably happen." Now I'd like to say that that has not happened here, solely by the grace of God. But sometimes I wonder if it isn't the fact that persecution itself is the grace of God. You see, our brothers and sisters of the faith in China, they're used to a faith that cost them everything. Ours costs us next to nothing. And so I wonder what is the blessing and what is the curse?

There's another quote by another man in that book that says, "You can only grow in jail what you take to jail with you. You can only grow in persecution what you take into it." Folks, I believe the possibility of persecution is very real not because of anything in particular having to do with government but because I know this world is in darkness and the darkness hates the light. That battle's been going on for thousands and thousands of years, and the Zeitgeist is defined by political forces that God is absolutely in control of. Just from my perspective, God is allowing the very, very outlying fringes of persecution to kind of become something that we're aware of. We're greatly aware of it throughout the world, I mean, Voice of the Martyrs has done a great job of making us aware of just what persecution is and how many of our brothers and sisters are under it. But are we prepared for when it comes to our shores? As this one man has suggested, you don't suddenly get it when you're in jail. You get it incrementally by taking little risks here now today. Can I share my faith with you? Can I give you a tract? What do you think about this Duck Dynasty thing? God is preparing us. I have no idea what's coming down the road, but I know that the best thing for every single one of us regardless of whether there's persecution or not is to be prepared. So my prayer is that we do just that. Let's pray.

*Father God, I do thank you and praise you for the gift of your*

Son. I thank you that he was willing to challenge those mere believers who were quite willing to give him whatever accolades he wanted and to press them and to push them. Of course it resulted in them picking up stones and wanting to kill him. But I am so thankful, Lord, that you still today address mere believers such as I was, people who had no genuine faith, and you challenged us to abide in you, to trust in you, to seek your truth. Father, I pray that you would give us, every one of us here in this room, the absolute assurance that we are one of your own and if we don't have that assurance, the absolute understanding that it's a matter of asking, it's a matter of looking right through the blindness that we're all under and crying out to God for the salvation that he's delighted to give if we would but ask. And so I pray if there's anyone here that is struggling with that, am I a believer, that he would stay behind, that he would talk to us, that we could pray with you, that we could share with you the gift that God wants to give to anyone who asks. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.