

The Gift of God

A Study of Galatians 2:15-21

Introduction

1. In deference to those who may have to leave part-way through my message—either physically or mentally—I'm going to tell you my big idea right up front. It's pretty simple. Nothing terribly profound. Here ► it is: Do not offer concrete flippers to a drowning man. That's the bottom line: Do not offer concrete flippers to a drowning man.

You see, for the sinking soul, concrete flippers do not make gracious gifts. For the one who is going under, concrete flippers are decidedly unhelpful.

Let me explain.

2. The Bible says that all of us are in some very deep spiritual water because of our own wrongdoing. We've selfishly alienated ourselves from the God who made us. And that selfishness has put us in a deadly dilemma. We're drowning. In fact, all of us need to be rescued. We're in way over our heads. Some of us may swim a little better than others, but ultimately, the depths of our own sinfulness will take us all down unless we're rescued. We're all drowning in guilt and we need a Savior.

In our heart of hearts, we know this. We may try to dilute it, deny it, dispute it, displace it, debate it, or delay it. But, deep down, we know we're in trouble. The Bible says that God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, lets all of us know, at the gut level, that we're in trouble.¹ Through a kind of divine e-mail sent directly to our hearts by the Spirit, we know we're in trouble. And we can't delete the message. We can try to ignore it; but it's always on our screen. We're drowning. That's the bad news.

3. But God has entrusted to His followers some good news that He wants us to deliver to people who are drowning. The good news is that we can be rescued. We can be rescued by simply receiving by faith a lifesaving gift—a gift that God has thrown out to us. The lifesaving gift comes in the person and promise of Jesus Christ the Son of God who died and rose again to rescue us from our own sin. We simply believe in Jesus to save us. It's an amazing grace that we don't deserve and we can't earn. We simply receive it by faith.

That is the good news. The gospel literally means, “good news.” And it seems to me that this good news—this gift of God—should be the simple, central message of the church today.

¹ John 16:8.

4. But sometimes the gospel of grace is so gagged or so garbled that it doesn't sound so good after all. Sometimes we Christians, with all sincerity and good-intentions, end up transmitting the gospel with such distortion and static that it sounds like we're offering concrete flippers to a drowning man.
 - a. The concrete flippers represent lists of things beyond simple faith that we think people must do in order to be saved. Or things we think people must do in order to *prove* that they are saved. Instead of saying, "Hey, here's the Lifesaver, just take it my friend," we end up saying, "Hey, here's some flippers; swim hard; we'll see how you do." Instead of throwing people a life line, we throw them a to-do list.
 - b. The concrete-flipper mentality can creep into a church so subtly, so imperceptibly, so gradually that many who adopt it don't even know it. The concrete-flipper mentality is so sneaky that it may not be reflected in a church's doctrinal statement, or in its organizational chart, or in its program descriptions, or even in its messages on Sunday morning. The concrete-flipper mentality can slither in, disguised as a high-sounding commitment to holiness, or as a call to obedience, or as resolution to change our ways. All of these

are good things, but none of them can save anybody from drowning spiritually.

- c. This flipper mentality is so sneaky that it has fooled some of the greatest people in the history of the Church. According to Galatians 2:11-14, the Apostle Peter was fooled. And Barnabas was fooled along with Him. They were beginning to drift. They were beginning to act as if Gentiles needed to behave like Jews in order to be saved. The Apostle Paul had to set them straight. If these guys can be fooled, if they can drift, so can we.

- 5. Has the flipper mentality crept into your thinking? How do you know? Well, we can take a lesson from some first-century churches located in the ancient region of Galatia. The flipper mentality had crept into some churches there. And the Apostle Paul writes about it. His writing addresses two aspects of the flipper mentality. Two aspects. Two flippers.

- I. Let's start with ► the first of the two flippers.

- A. It is ironic that the first Christians were Jews, and many Jews were not quite sure whether or not they really wanted Gentiles in the church. You see, God had long before chosen the Jews to be His people, to transmit the knowledge and blessing of God to the rest of the world. In addition, God had made certain covenants with the

Jews through people like Abraham and Moses and Jeremiah. What's more, God had used the Jews to record and assemble His word in the Old Testament, including what they called The Law which consisted of some 613 rules and regulations including the Ten Commandments.

This special, historical status of the Jewish people tempted some Jews to look down upon Gentiles as inferior. In fact, Jews commonly called Gentiles "sinners" (e.g., Matthew 23:23). In calling Gentiles "sinners," Jews were not saying that they themselves were perfect and without sin. To Jews, the term, "sinners" was a characterization of Gentiles as a people who did not have the Law to restrain them. Without the Law, Gentiles were considered much greater sinners by comparison. They viewed Gentiles like some might view college kids at a Florida beach on spring break: hedonists unrestrained by moral rules. So, the "sinners" label stuck, though, technically, Jews were sinners too, and they knew it.

Interestingly, one Bible scholar points out that the term, "sinner" was also used as "an intra-Jewish polemic against fellow Jews who failed to conform to their own definition of righteousness."²

² James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians, Black's New Testament Commentary*, Henry Chadwick, ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 133.

Paul uses this Gentile label, perhaps with a touch of irony, in Galatians 2:15. That's the beginning of the biblical text we're going to be studying. In Galatians 2:15, Paul says,

^{NAU} Galatians 2:15 “We *are* Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles”

Notice this is a part of a quote that extends through Verse 21. These words were probably originally spoken by Paul to Peter in person when he confronted him about his flipper mentality. Paul records the quote here for the benefit of the Galatian churches and those of us in the church today. Paul is introducing his case against those with a flipper mentality by following a then-common pattern of argument.³ The pattern is ► to first establish common ground by making some statements on which there is general agreement. Paul does this in Verses 15-16. Then there is a transition to certain ► points of disagreement. Paul covers these in Verses 17-20. Finally, the argument is brought to a close in ► Verse 21. Paul unpacks the argument more fully in subsequent parts of his letter to the Galatians, but for this morning, we're just going to cover this introductory salvo.

³ Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol 41, Bruce M. Metzger, ed. (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1990), 82.

When Paul writes in Verse 15 “We *are* Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles;” you can bet his Jewish readers would have thought to themselves, “You got that right!”

- B. Then, in ► Verse 16, Paul presents another point on which there is agreement, at least between him and Peter. Verse 16 is a critically important verse in which Paul says that we are all rescued from the penalty of our sin by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Although, Paul and Peter agreed on this point, some other Jews did not. Some Jewish Christians called Judaizers were even saying that Gentiles had to become Jews through circumcision before they could become Christians. The Judaizers were, in effect, offering a concrete flipper to Gentiles. This is the first of two concrete flippers we’re going to consider. This concrete flipper was the list of Jewish laws that the Judaizers were offering to Gentiles as a list of requirements for getting eternally saved. In ► Verse 16, Paul shreds this concrete flipper like a bite from Jaws. He says,

^{NAU} Galatians 2:16 “nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of

the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.”

1. Notice the term, ► “justified” is used three times in this one verse. “Justified” is a legal term that means to declare righteous. It does not mean to *be* righteous; it means to *declare* righteous. We’re all guilty of sin. To be justified means that we’re set free from the penalty of our sin. In our metaphor, it’s the way a person is rescued from drowning.

Here’s what one Bible scholar has to say about it.

The verb “justified” . . . is a legal metaphor that speaks of God’s judgment in favor of someone. . . . For Paul the word does not suggest the infusion of moral qualities. It implies the justification of the ungodly who believe on the basis of the justifying action of God in the death and resurrection of Christ.⁴

To be justified means to be permanently adopted by God the Father into His forever family—a family that will experience heaven together.

⁴ G. Walter Hansen, *Galatians, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, Grant R. Osborne, ed, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 68.

2. And notice also how a person is justified—how a person is adopted into the family. It is through faith alone. Belief alone. Paul emphasizes this by repeating it three times. A man is justified “through ► *faith* in Christ Jesus.” In case you missed that, Paul adds, “We have ► *believed* in Christ Jesus.” And in case you missed that, he adds: “So that we may be justified by ► *faith* in Christ.” Paul is pounding the point.

C. How do we apply this today?

1. We dare not add anything to faith in Jesus as a condition for being justified before God. To add anything else is to contradict Paul and offer a concrete flipper instead of the Lifesaver.
2. There are no conditions beyond faith for adoption into God’s forever family. Not church membership. Not church attendance. Not baptism. Not forsaking all our sin. Not being good. Not getting our acts together. Not feeling really sorry. Not saying a prayer. Not a public profession. Not coming forward in response to an altar call. Not making a promise. Not obedience. Not reading the Bible. Not giving our hearts. Not

confession. Not even repentance when repentance is understood as anything other than believing.⁵

These are good things for a child of God to do—a child who has already been adopted. And, as family members, we should take the rules of the family very seriously. But, they are not requirements for adoption. And to make them requirements is to offer a concrete flipper to a drowning man. Salvation comes through faith alone, not by works.

3. Because God's grace is free and unearned, it is available to anyone who will believe, even to those often labeled the worst "sinners" of our day. God's grace is available to the abortionist. The homosexual. The pedophile. The serial killer. Osama Bin Laden. The child pornographer. The abuser. And you and me. God's free gift of eternal life can be received by anyone who believes. Anyone.

That's the point I made in one of my sermons some years ago, and a guy came up to me

⁵ Most often, the Bible uses the term "repent" or "repentance" to signify a change of mind in a direction away from sin and toward God. So the biblical command to repent is normally a command to get right with God. To turn from sin toward God. To seek relational harmony with Him. Some scholars argue that, in a few isolated cases, repentance may actually be synonymous with faith, on the thinking that the change of mind is from unbelief to belief. While that may be true, that is not the usual meaning of repentance in the Bible.

afterwards. He was angry. His face was red. He was shaking. He could hardly contain himself. He raised his hand and said to me in a thoroughly disgusted tone: “You mean to tell me that homosexuals are going to heaven?”

And I said, “If they believe in Jesus, yes sir. They’ll be there right along with the self-righteous, angry, uncompassionate believers.”

- II. The ► angry guy’s objection to free grace is common. “That’s too easy.” “That’s easy believism!” “That’s only half the gospel.” “That’s cheap grace!” “That promotes sin!”

I believe that Paul heard these kinds of objections from some of his Jewish brothers. In fact, it appears that while some may have conceded Paul’s faith-alone argument at the front end of justification, they tried to attach works to the back end, thereby offering another kind of concrete flipper: the back-loaded flipper. That’s ► the second kind of concrete flipper in the flipper mentality. We could call it the back-loaded flipper or the yes-but flipper.

Here’s how the typical argument goes: “Yes, I’ll concede that faith is all you need to be rescued from drowning. Yes, but. Yes, but in order to know that you’ve really been saved, in order to prove it, you must do certain things, and if you don’t do these things, well, then you were not really saved to

begin with. Your faith is not genuine. Because real saving faith does works. Besides, if you overdo this faith-alone business, people will feel like they can just sin whenever they feel like it. Easy believism is a license to sin.”

I think this is really the same concrete flipper turned in a different direction. First, we have the front-loaded flipper that falsely demands that we work to be saved. Now, this is the back-loaded flipper that falsely demands that we have to prove that we are saved, and if we can't, then we weren't really saved to begin with.

- A. Those who offer a back-loaded flipper tend to redefine faith. Most would agree that salvation is through faith alone apart from works. But many redefine saving faith to include works. As if believing means obeying. As if genuine faith means works and cannot possibly be separated from works.

Fred Chay and John Correia have just published a good book titled, *The Faith that Saves*.⁶ It's thin. And thick. It's a study of the nature of faith in the New Testament. They show that adding works to the definition of faith, though common, is simply not justified.

The back-loaded flipper seems to have its own saying. You may have heard it; it goes all the way back to John

⁶ Fred Chay and John P. Correia, *The Faith that Saves: The Nature of Faith in the New Testament*, (Phoenix, AZ: Grace Line, 2008).

Calvin: “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.”⁷ Which is very catchy. “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.” Catchy, but deceptive and confusing.

And, I don’t know, but I think car dealerships may have picked up on this idea. You see a nice car on the lot, and on the window it says in day-glo paint, “Yours for only \$19,995.” So you write a check for \$19,995, you hand it to the car guy, and you say, “I’ll buy it; give me the keys!”

And the guy says, “I’m afraid you’re short; it costs more than \$19,995.”

“But wait a minute,” you say, “it says, ‘Yours for only \$19,995.’”

And the guy says, “Yes, I know. But here’s the deal: You are sold by price alone, but the price that sells is never alone. There’s tax, license, and dealer prep.”

In our text, Paul says faith has no add-ons. He takes pains to separate faith and works. Add-on works are not part of the deal. Remember, ► the three times Paul mentions believing or faith as the sole condition for our justification in Verse 16? Well, each time, he carefully

⁷ Attributed to John Calvin in response to the Council of Trent canon 11 in his Antidotes to Trent.

shakes off any association with works. We are justified through faith, ► “Not justified by the works of the Law.” No add-ons. We are justified by faith, ► “Not by the works of the Law.” No add-ons. Faith and works are not to be mixed or confused because ► “By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.” No add-ons. No tax, license, and dealer prep.

- B. I believe Paul takes another bite out of the back-loaded flipper in ► Verse 17, which at first blush may be hard to understand. He says,

^{NAU} Galatians 2:17 “But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be!”

A couple of things help us to understand what Paul is saying.

The little ► word, “if” is a translation of something called a first-class condition that is assumed to be true. So, it’s not as “iffy” as the English rendering may imply. It could be properly rendered, ► “since” instead of “if.” As such, Paul is asserting two things as facts with which some of his readers would probably agree.

1. First, ► Paul and others have been justified in Christ, by faith, not by the works of the Law.

2. Second, ► as a result of abandoning the works of the Law as a means of justification, Paul and others have been found to be “sinners.”

How so? In what sense would Paul be found a sinner as a result of his conversion? And who’s doing the judging?

Well, remember the Jewish use of the term “sinner.” It was used by Jews to describe Gentiles and fellow Jews who were not measuring up to the traditional standards of righteousness in keeping the Law. Paul was found to be a sinner in the eyes of some fellow Jewish Christians because he was now exercising his freedom in Christ to break the old Jewish law. Eating with Gentiles was but one example of such a violation.

3. Now, Paul uses these facts to expose the folly of the logic of his detractors. In effect, he says, “If, you acknowledge that I’ve been justified by faith alone in Christ. And, if you believe that, as a result, I have become a sinner like the Gentiles. Then, by definition, you must also believe that Jesus promotes sin.”

This is a preposterous notion. That’s why he says in the last part of ► Verse 17,

^{NAU} Galatians 2:17 “. . . is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be!”

To be sure, Christ is not a minister or promoter of sin, so the logic is wrong. The back-loaded flipper is bogus. We are justified by faith, and the works of the Law play no role whatsoever in our liberation from the penalty of our sin, either before or after our conversion. And if you think that promotes sin, then you’ll have to take that up with the Lord because it’s His idea.

There are usually two ways of paying for things: in advance, or in arrears. You pay before you receive the benefit, or you pay after you receive it. Either way you pay.

But, God’s gift of salvation is absolutely free. We don’t pay for it at the front or the back.

- C. Paul goes on to explain that to require works of the Law even after justification as some kind of condition in arrears is in itself wrong. The back-loaded flipper should be abandoned. If the works of the Law have been destroyed as the basis of our justification, they should not be rebuilt as the measure of our acceptability or authenticity as Christians after we believe. Paul says in ► Verse 18,

^{NAU} Galatians 2:18 “For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor.”

- D. In fact, to hold up the Law or any other list of do’s and don’ts as the basis for our acceptability is to misunderstand the whole purpose of the Law. The Law was given to show us that we all fall hopelessly short of God’s standard for righteousness. Therefore, we must depend entirely on God’s mercy and power to save us. The purpose of the Law was to work its way out of a job and point to our need for God. That’s what Paul is saying in ► Verse 19. He says,

^{NAU} Galatians 2:19 “For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God.”

One commentator explains this succinctly, saying, “In Pauline usage, ‘to die to’ something is to cease to have any further relation to it. Conversely, ‘to live to’ someone means to have a personal, unrestricted relationship with that one.”⁸

When it comes to his salvation from the penalty of sin, Paul lets go of the list and latches on to the Lord.

⁸ Longenecker, 91.

- E. Some may say, “But if you don’t have the list of do’s and don’ts as conditions, people are just going to sin more. They will feel no sense of obligation to follow Jesus. It’ll be spring break at the beach! Easy believism does not take God seriously!”

Paul uses himself as a contradictory case in point in ► Verse 20. He explains his own experience as an example of the effect God’s amazing grace has on people. He shows that freedom in Christ is not a license for selfishness.

In fact, he says that burning the list of do’s and don’ts as conditions for salvation frees him to focus on Jesus. He says in ► Verse 20,

^{NAU} Galatians 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ . . .”

He took my place on that cross to pay for my sins.
Christ rescued me when I was hopelessly drowning.
Now, I’m relying on Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection as the basis for my assurance—so much so that it’s as if I had been crucified right along with him. I look to the Lord, not a list.

He continues in ► Verse 20,

^{NAU} Galatians 2:20 “. . . and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me . . .”

Grace does not make me self-centered, it frees me to be Christ-centered. The legalistic list constrains me to focus on my performance and my achievements and to compare them to other people. The Lord who has already accepted me and who lives in me frees me to serve Him fully without regard to my own self-protective, self-promoting, self-authenticating agenda.

He continues in ► Verse 20,

^{NAU} Galatians 2:20 “. . . and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

I live by faith, not by a list. And, the focus of my faith is not myself or my works. It's the Son of God. And my faith is nourished by the sacrificial and unconditional love He has demonstrated.

Does it sound like the free, grace-oriented, faith-alone gospel message has made Paul self-centered and more prone to sin? No way!

- F. What ► difference does all this make? Where does this second, back-loaded concrete flipper show up in our lives today?

1. Well, for one thing, this flipper robs our assurance as believers. The back-loaded flipper mentality can be reflected two ways.

Some say that you are saved by faith, but that you can lose your salvation if you don't keep up good works.

Others say that you can't lose your salvation, but if you don't keep up good works to the very end, you were never really saved to begin with.

We could ► diagram the back-loaded flipper mentality this way. Faith produces good works, and, in turn, the good works serve as the basis of our assurance. If you buy this concrete flipper, then real assurance is impossible because it's based on your own effort. You are either afraid that you might spend eternity in hell because you could lose your salvation, or you're afraid that when you die, you might discover that you really weren't saved after all because your faith didn't prove itself good enough through works.

Listen to a true story of how this kind of thinking affects real people. This is a real interaction between best friends who are Christians, told from the perspective of one of the friends.

I still remember the night Dan called me. . . . I could tell by the quiver in Dan's voice that night that something was seriously wrong. Weeping, he said, "I really blew it this time . . . Melanie is pregnant," he finally confessed. Melanie was his girlfriend. . . . I did my best to encourage Dan that night on the phone.

Then a few weeks later, Dan called again. This time his tone was joyful and enthusiastic. "Guess what?" he asked, not waiting for me to answer. "I got saved last night!" I didn't know quite how to respond because I knew that Dan had trusted Christ as His Savior at the age of seven. . . . He related that . . . in the wake of his moral failure he had become convinced that he wasn't really saved. "I mean, how could I be? Christians don't do the kinds of things I was doing," he reasoned. "But this time, I really mean business with the Lord. This time I'm fully committed."

Over the next few months I provided some occasional counseling as he and Melanie decided to get married. . . .

Five years later, I received another call. It was Dan. Again, he was crying. . . . “Can you come over right away?” he pleaded. “I really need to talk with you.” . . .

“What happened?” I asked tentatively. . . . Dan said, “I’ve been having an affair.”

[Several weeks later] . . . he called me.

“Guess what?” he asked. “I got saved two weeks ago and I was baptized last Sunday. . . . I realized that I had never truly repented of my sins and fully surrendered to the Lordship of Christ. But this time, I really mean it! I am totally committed to the Lord.”⁹

What happened with Dan? I suspect somebody offered him a concrete flipper. He put it on and tried to prove himself acceptable to God. But, he got tired and gave up. He couldn't measure up. And, every time he stumbled, he questioned his own salvation because his assurance was based on his own works.

⁹ Recounted by J.B. Hixson in Jan/Feb 2002 “Grace in Focus.”

Some years ago I attended a local evangelistic crusade in which the speaker said that if you do not understand the holiness of God, and if you do not remember the moment you were saved, and if you persistently struggle with a particular sin, then you're not a Christian, you're not saved. If that is true, I'm not a Christian. I don't fully understand the holiness of God. I don't remember the moment I was saved. And, I persistently struggle with perfectionism, workaholism, and imbalance in my life. I didn't get saved that night; I just got angry—angry at the offering of another concrete flipper to a drowning man.

Here's a ► better diagram—a more biblical one. Our faith *is* the assurance that we have received the free gift of eternal life, just as Christ promised. Hebrews 11:1 tells us:

^{NAU} Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Our assurance is based on His promise, not our performance. And, that assurance frees us, that assurance invites us, that assurance compels us to do good works—good works in loving response to the Father who graciously adopted us and accepted us.

2. The ► flipper mentality robs us of assurance, but that's not all. It also promotes a kind of insecure superficiality in the church. It fosters an unsafe environment where you don't dare reveal how you're struggling. You don't dare confess your sin. You don't dare be an authentic struggler. You don't dare because somebody's going to hold up a list and show you how you're unacceptable to God or you're a counterfeit.

Truth is, we're all patients in a spiritual hospital called the church, but the flipper mentality makes us pretend like we're all doctors.

The flipper mentality fosters an unsafe environment where you don't dare ask questions about God or reveal doubts about Christianity and confess that you just don't get what some parts of the Bible are talking about. To do so is to risk being cut from the heaven team.

Because of the grace of God and the absolute security we have as His children, the church family ought to be the safest place on earth to be yourself. It ought to be the safest place on earth to work through the ugliness and fear and doubt and dysfunction in your life.

But let's face it. It isn't. Not generally. Why not? Because we're offering concrete flippers to a drowning man.

- III. We must ► jettison the concrete flippers. In their place, we must ► offer the absolutely free, lifesaving gift of eternal life. We must offer it to others as graciously as God has offered it to us.

Is this cheap grace? Does it somehow mitigate or nullify the grace of God to say that it is free?

Paul concludes in ► Verse 21 with a summary thesis statement. He says,

^{NAU} Galatians 2:21 "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness *comes* through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

Paul says, "I do not nullify the grace of God by saying that salvation or justification is an unconditional free gift to be received." The implication here is that anyone who *does* add conditions to such salvation *does indeed* nullify God's grace. You see grace is something real good that we don't deserve. Because Jesus paid the entire price for our justification, then this grace is not cheap, it is infinitely costly. Costly, but free. To say that we must do something to earn it or maintain it or authenticate it is to say that Christ died needlessly. It is to say to Jesus, "Thanks for coming and dying and all that, but

it's not enough; I need to help you out by doing some good things myself.”

Last year at this conference, I spoke of an ASU professor of philosophy who came with her husband to a Life Group that meets in our home. At my church, Life Groups are where we come together to help each other apply the Bible to our lives. You may recall that the professor—her name is Shari—she's an environmentalist. An alcoholic. A feminist. And an agnostic. Or was.

After coming to our Life Group and our church, Shari said to me, “I've noticed that you consistently present belief in Jesus as the only requirement for salvation. That's not something I heard in church when I was little.”

She said, “At first, when I came to Life Group, I would not close my eyes when you all prayed. And I don't know if you noticed, but whenever I said something about God, I couldn't bring myself to call God a ‘He.’ But then, somewhere along the line, I don't know when it happened, I just found myself believing.”

Then she said, “I just want to make sure I'm getting this right. Having believed in Jesus, I'm forgiven and accepted and adopted and there's nothing I can do to undo that?”

I said, “That's right, having believed, your security depends on God's promise, not your performance.”

She paused reflectively, and she said: “That is so freeing. It helps me to take my eyes off myself.”

Now, that’s a pretty good story. But let me tell you the rest of the story that has unfolded since. Shari came to our church as an agnostic. But her husband, Don, came as atheist. The only reason he accompanied Shari was to support her as a recovering alcoholic. Don figured, even though this God thing is bogus, it might help his wife stay sober.

After about a year or so, Don came up to me one Sunday and said, “I’m beginning to think that there’s something to this Christ. I’d like to buy a Bible. Could you recommend one? And I know you’re busy, but I was wondering if I could sit down with somebody and try to learn some things.”

Don and I began to meet at Starbucks to talk about what the Bible says. And Don kept saying, “I’ve been in and around some churches growing up, but I’ve never heard this message of grace before.” And Don never used these exact words, but in various ways, he kept coming back to the same issue, mildly surprised: “You people aren’t offering concrete flippers.”

Then one Sunday just last December, it was communion Sunday. During the sermon, Don’s wife thought he was

sleeping. He wasn't. He was praying. Then he got up and took communion.

With a broad smile, he broke the news at our Life Group the following Thursday. "I believe." We all stopped to pray, each one giving thanks and praying for Don. Then the earth stopped turning. Don prayed. Aloud. First time ever. He awkwardly gave thanks for God's patience and His grace. And he gave thanks for his Life Group friends who had also shown him patience and grace. That night, in that moment, we wept for joy.

Do not offer concrete flippers to a drowning man. Throw him the lifesaving gift. The gift of God.