A summary of the book…

“THE DISCIPLINE OF GRACE”
by Jerry Bridges

The pursuit of holiness must be motivated by an ever-increasing understanding of “God’s grace;” or its pursuit will become oppressive and joyless. According to Jerry Bridges, two of the great theological giants on this subject are the Puritan theologian “John Owen,” and the 19th century Scottish theologian “George Smeaton.” It has often been said that in the pursuit of holiness we need to “preach the gospel to ourselves every day.” We try to change ourselves into robust Christlike specimens, but spiritual transformation is primarily the work of the “Holy Spirit” – He is the Master Sculptor. The Holy Spirit’s work in transforming us is called “sanctification.” The pursuit of holiness sounds like “legalism;” however, grace and the personal discipline required to pursue it are not opposed to one another. Because we find it difficult to believe that God would bless us and use us in the midst of a “bad spiritual day,” deep down we somehow believe God’s blessing on our lives is conditioned upon our “spiritual performance.” So, when we have had a bad day, there is virtually no doubt in our minds that we have forfeited God’s favor for some period of time, at least until the next day. Such thinking reveals that, although we are saved by grace, we earn or forfeit God’s blessings in our daily lives by our performance. The truth of the matter is, there is never a day when we can stand before God on our own two feet of performance – not an hour! Even the best works of believers are shot through with sin. It’s been said that every time the great 19th century preacher “Charles Spurgeon” stepped into the pulpit, he did so with the silent prayer, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Lk 18:13). Here is an important spiritual principle that sums up these thoughts:

Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God’s grace… and your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God’s grace.

We are not only SAVED by grace – we also must LIVE by grace – Only a continuous reminder of the “gospel of God’s grace through Christ” will keep us from falling into the “good-day/bad-day” kind of thinking. We must “consciously” reflect upon the gospel of God’s grace to us every day, or we will start focusing on “our performance” or start “feeling guilty.” When we focus on “our performance,” we move away from grace… and then we try to relate to God directly on the basis of “our performance.” Conversely, it is only the blood of Jesus that will cleanse us from a guilty conscience.” When we apply the gospel to our hearts every day, it frees us to be brutally honest with ourselves and with God – we can call sin exactly what it is, regardless of how ugly or shameful it may be, because we know that Jesus bore that sin in His body on the cross. Some fear this emphasis on the gospel might simply “harden them in their abuse of God’s grace” – the truth of the matter is, the last thing those who struggle with sin and failure need, is to have more guilt laid upon them. It is tremendously liberating to know that our sins are forgiven, no matter how much we stumble and fall, that God still does not count our sins against us (Rom 4:8). That’s the incredible “good news” of the gospel.

Preaching the gospel to ourselves EVERY DAY addresses both the “self-righteous Pharisee” and the “guilt-laden sinner” that dwells in our hearts. We must come to terms with the fact that God’s grace is greater than all our sins. Repentance is one of the Christian’s highest privileges – a repentant Christian focuses on God’s mercy and God’s grace, not on his behavior. When we fail – and fail we will! – the Spirit of God will work on us and bring us to the foot of the cross where Jesus carried our failures. By the way, we fail when we shift our attention away from grace and mercy. (7-27)
In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:11-12), the Pharisee was self-righteous, and the Tax Collector was painfully aware of his sinfulness—he cried out, “God be merciful to me the sinner.” Christians tend toward one of two opposite attitudes—either they have a relentless sense of guilt, and frequently dwell on their besetting sins…or they have a degree of self-righteous satisfaction with their Christian life. Jesus told this parable to those who were confident of their own righteousness. It is interesting to note that Jesus said the Tax Collector went home “justified”—the same Greek word used for “righteous.” The two most dominant “character traits” for believers in the New Testament are love (the primary Christian character trait) and humility (there are nearly 40 references to humility in the NT); after love and humility, there are at least 25 other Christian virtues mentioned. Believers should simultaneously view themselves as “saints and sinners”—what we are in Christ is saints; what we are in ourselves is sinners. Therefore, while we should always rejoice in the righteousness we have in Christ, we should never cease to feel deeply for our own sinfulness and subsequent unworthiness. (29-43)

At salvation, the righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed or credited to us forever—We are declared righteous solely on the meritorious work of Christ on the cross. Our standing in Christ’s righteousness is never affected to any degree by a good-day or a bad-day performance. Unless we learn to “live by faith in the reality of Christ’s righteousness,” our perception of our standing before God will vary depending on our good or bad performance. Faith in Christ and a reliance on ourselves, even to the smallest degree, are mutually exclusive. Because we have a tendency to vacillate in our faith due to our frequent failures and sins, we feel like we are under condemnation…that God is not for us, but is actually against us…and we think He is the one who is bringing charges against us—so crafty is the work of Satan in our minds and hearts! Remember, Satan is the “accuser of the brethren!” (Rev 12:10; Rom 8:33). Scripture says, “there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). Therefore, at such times we must “preach the gospel” to ourselves; that is, we must “affirm” what God has declared to be true about our justification (righteousness) in Christ. Scripture also tells us that “God is for us!” (Rm 8:31). So when our conscience tries to defeat us with guilt, we must bring the verdict of our conscience into line with the verdict of Heaven—by faith we must remind ourselves that our guilt has been borne by Christ.

The death of Christ secured for us not only “freedom from the penalty of sin,” but also deliverance from the “dominion of sin” in our lives. Romans 6:1-14 is the primary passage in Scripture that deals with “freedom from the dominion of sin”—verse 2 says, “we died to sin”—the aorist tense indicates this is a completed action that occurred in the past (at the cross)—the fact is every believer has died to sin; we cannot die any more to sin than we already have, and our awareness of this fact does not make it any more true or not true. When we died to sin, we died to a status wherein we were under bondage to the tyrannical reign of sin. The following question, however, naturally arises: “If we died to sin’s dominion, why do we still struggle with sins in our daily lives?” All unbelievers live in the dominion or realm of sin—they live under its reign—they have not died to sin; as such “they are alive to sin,” and everything they do is in accord with the “sinful constitution that rules in their soul”—the individual himself rules his own life, and he would never think of submitting to the lordship of Christ. To understand the unbeliever’s diabolical position, look at Paul’s definition of sin (Rm 14:23—unbelief). All believers, on the other hand, are “new creations”—they have God’s Law (a holy constitution) written upon their hearts, and are indwelled by the Holy Spirit; they are alive to God, and live in the realm of grace by the power of the Holy Spirit. (45-91)

Scripture says we are in the process of “being transformed” into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18)–The Greek term translated “transformed” is actually the word “metamorphosis”—it is the same word that describes the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly; this is the word Paul uses to describe the “spiritual transformation” that takes place in the life of a Christian. The term that is used by theologians
to describe the process of transformation is “sanctification.” Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in us whereby our inner being is “progressively changed” – freeing us more and more from sinful traits and developing within us over time the virtues of Christlike character. Though sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, it does involve our whole-hearted response in “obedience” and the regular use of the “spiritual disciplines” that are instruments of sanctification. The work of sanctification is a “cooperative” work – God directs and we cooperate by following His lead – though the principal work of sanctification is accomplished by the Holy Spirit (as it is in justification), we also play a critical part in it (Phil 2:12-13; 1 Cor 3:6). Believers are called to trust and obey God – faith and obedience are two sides of the same coin.

Sanctification actually begins at “conversion” – at the “new birth” the principle of “spiritual life” is planted within us. This work was prophesied by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, where God said, “I will write My laws on your hearts” and “I will give you a new heart... I will put My Spirit in you to make you walk in My ways” (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26-27). Paul describes regeneration this way: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, and all things become new” (2 Cor 5:17). He also writes: “He saved us by the washing of regeneration and the renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). Note the radical change that is explicitly described in each of these passages. God puts His law in our minds and write it on our hearts – that is, He gives us a “new disposition,” so instead of being hostile to God’s law, the believer now actually delights in it. Jesus said being “born again” means to be “born of the Spirit” (John 3:6, 8) – therefore the act of regeneration (new birth) is solely the work of the Holy Spirit; it is entirely a work of grace. Regeneration, then, is the beginning of “sanctification” – the process whereby we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor 3:18).

Sanctification is a “life-long process” whereby we are changed “from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18); that is, as the Spirit of God works in us, we progress from one stage of glory (or grace) to the next. A part of the process includes an “inner conflict” between our “sin nature” (called “the flesh”) and the “Holy Spirit.” Paul says, “The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please” (Gal 5:17). Paul elaborated on this struggle in greater detail in Romans 7:14-25, where he said such things as, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature; for I have the desire to do what is good, but I am simply not able to do it” (Rom 7:18).

The presence of sin in the believer involves “conflict” in his heart and life. It is absolutely futile to argue that this conflict is abnormal – because sin is still resident in every believer along with the presence of the Holy Spirit; as such, there is a “warring tension” in the heart of every believer. There must be a constant and increasing appreciation in the mind of the believer, that though sin is obviously still resident in him, it is not his master. As one theologian put it –

“It is one thing for sin to live in us; it is quite another for us to live in sin.

Sin is like a defeated army that, instead of surrendering and laying down its arms, it fades into the countryside, from which it continues to wage a guerrilla war of harassment and sabotage against the prevailing government forces. Sin as a “reigning power” in our life has been defeated – but it refuses to surrender! If we are going to “pursue holiness” we must accept the fact that there will be continual tension within us between our desires and our performance. As British theologian J. I. Packer so often says, “Our reach will always exceed our grasp.”
To reiterate, it is the “Holy Spirit” who transforms us into Christ’s likeness – The verb “being transformed” (2 Cor 3:18) in Greek is passive, meaning that the action is being done “to” us – not “by” us. This does not mean we are without responsibility – as believers we are called to “cooperate with Him” and “do what He asks us to do;” but in the final analysis the Holy Spirit is the one who works deep within our character to change us (numerous passages teach this – 1 Th 2:13; 5:23-24; Phil 1:6; Heb 13:21; 1 Pet 1:2). The principle is clearly taught by Paul when he says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth” (1 Cor 3:6). As believers, we have the “responsibility to obey God,” but our obeying is not the “direct cause” of the outcome – God is the one who effectuates the outcome. We may plant seeds in the ground and water, but we do not “cause” the growth – that is the work of God. When we are “obedient” to God, He honors His Word by making it fruitful and efficacious – as such, He is the “Great Mover” behind our action – He is the “Effectuator!” With that understanding, we must be mindful of “our responsibility” in the sanctifying process – God gives us instructions to follow – when we follow (obey), He blesses; when we don’t follow, He does not bless. Conversely, when we don’t follow His instructions, He has ways to get us to do so. When King David refused to “deal with his sin,” God applied “sufficient pressure” to him to get Him to obey (Ps 32:3-5 and Heb 12:5-7). God told David, “Don’t be like the horse or the mule who has no understanding, whose trappings include a bit and bridle to hold him in check” (Ps 32:9). The message is pretty clear: God will put a bit in your mouth and a bridle on you – “if He has to” – to get you to obey Him. Remember the words of the psalmist: “Know that the LORD Himself is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture” (Ps 100:3). God’s goal is to make us like His Son… and that He will do, one way or the other (Rom 8:29; Phil 1:6; 2:13; Heb 13:21) – be it with our faithful cooperation, resulting in much joy and peace… or our being stubborn and less cooperative, resulting in little joy and more scourging (Heb 12:5-11; 1 Cor 3:1-15). The choice is ours: either we can choose to be cooperative, or we can choose to be less cooperative. (93-109)

The greatest commandment in the Bible is to “love God with our entire being” – We are to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mt 22:37; Deut 6:5). “If you love Me,” Jesus said, “you will keep My commandments” (Jn 14:15; 1 Jn 5:3). The equating of obedience to God with love to God is a prominent feature of the book of Deuteronomy as well (Deut 10:12-13; 11:13; 11:22; 19:9; 30:6,8; 30:19-20). The fact is, our love to God will always manifest itself in obedience to Him. The writer of Hebrews says, “Without faith (believing God) it is impossible to please God” (Heb 11:6). How can one say he loves God, yet refuses to obey Him or believe Him? (essentially calling Him a “liar”). Remember, “not believing” someone is akin to calling that person “a liar” – obviously that is not going to please someone. Imagine your spouse or your best friend truthfully telling you something, and then you respond with, “I don’t believe you” – would you actually expect them to be pleased with you? Then how then can you expect God to be pleased with you when you refuse to believe Him, or obey Him, and call Him a liar? Inherent in the concept of “faith” is action – not mere mental ascent (Jam 1:22; 2:14, 19, 20) – so, if we really love God, then our desire is to please Him by believing Him and obeying Him. Essentially, love is a “motive;” without love our obedience would be “self-serving.” Negatively, I may fear God will punish me if I do not obey; hence I choose to obey… and positively, I desire that God bless me – thus I choose to obey. Conversely, there are other lesser motives like pride, or consequences, or self-esteem… but “love” is the supreme motive.

The key to obeying God is “developing our love for God” – Scripture teaches, “We love God because He first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19); thus, our love to God can only be a response to His love for us. If we do not believe God loves us, we will not love Him – no human being genuinely loves someone who does not love them; only God can love like that. Therefore, to love God, we must believe that He is for us, not against us (Rom 8:31), and herein is the “hick-up” for most believers – they are not absolutely certain that God “loves” them; they have a difficult time persuading themselves that God really does love them – why is this
the case? Because they know they do not deserve His love. A “tender conscience” is a great advantage in the pursuit of holiness, because it is so sensitive to sin; but this same tender conscience can load us down with a tremendous burden of guilt and a sense of condemnation – therefore it is difficult to believe that God really loves us; because we know we are unlovely. James Fraser on this subject said, “Human nature is so formed, that it cannot love any object that is adverse and terrible to it” – that means, we cannot love God if we think we are under His judgment and condemnation. The solution? It is absolutely essential that we continually take those sins our consciences accuse us of to the Cross and plead the cleansing blood of Jesus; because it is only the blood of Christ that cleanses our consciences so that we may no longer feel guilty (Heb 9:14; 10:2). By the way, the greatest sorrow you can lay on the Father, is to believe that He does not love you – carefully reflect on that statement. That is why it is so important that we keep the “gospel of grace” before us every day – because we sin every day, and our consciences condemn us every day (some more than others), we need the gospel every day (actually, many times a day!). The conscience once cleansed no longer retains a charge of guiltiness and of judgment for it. When our sense of guilt is taken away, we are freed up to love God with all our heart and soul and mind. Our love for God will be spontaneous in an outpouring of gratitude to Him and fervent desire to obey Him. The apostle Paul writes, “The only that thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal 5:6). As we by faith feed on the gospel (faith is affirming the truth), that faith will express itself in love—that is, in loving obedience to God. That is the very nature of faith. Jesus said, “He who has been forgiven little loves little” (Lk 7:47); the inverse is also true – “He who has been forgiven much loves much.” When we genuinely affirm the reality of all God has done for us, it will dramatically affect the way in which we live. (111-125)

Therefore, we can say that the extent to which we realize and acknowledge our own sinfulness, and the extent to which we realize the total forgiveness and cleansing from those sins, will determine the measure of our love to God.

In the pursuit of holiness we must exercise both “discipline” and “dependence” – Discipline refers to certain activities designed to train a person in a particular skill. Paul exhorted Timothy to “discipline himself” for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim 4:7); notice that Paul said “discipline yourself” – thus part of the responsibility for growing in holiness lies on the shoulders of the believer. Notice that Paul does not just tell Timothy to “turn it all over to the Lord and everything will be fine.” Furthermore, logic alone tells us that God does not ask us to do something we are not capable of doing. So let us first understand that God is not asking us to long jump the Grand Canyon! or pole vault the Eiffel Tower (spiritually speaking). Therefore, if you are thinking that God is asking you to do something that “you cannot do” – you have misunderstood something – so, study the matter before you throw in the towel. The truth of the matter is God gives us the responsibility to “respond” according to our “abilities” – hence the word, response/ability – nothing more, nothing less (Mt 25:15). By the way, to whom He gives much, He requires much (Lk 12:48). Remember these two principles: 1) God enables us to do the things He asks us to do; and 2) God will not do for us the things He asks us to do for ourselves. There are many passages in Scripture where this concept is taught – “Unless the LORD build the house, its BUILDERS labor in vain” (Ps 127:1). Your responsibility as a believer is to “do your part,” when you do, you can depend upon God to “do His part!” The builders cannot put away their tools and go fishing and expect God to build the house – by the way, “praying your head off” is not going to get you off the hook! When God gives you “orders” to do something – you do it! Any plea of ignorance or inability will not cut it. Nehemiah, the wall-builder, understood well the principle of “dependent discipline,” the idea that we are both responsible and dependent – Nehemiah and his people both “prayed” and “posted a guard.” Think about that.
Regarding the situation in which you find yourself – you must both “pray” (that is dependence on God) and “obey” (doing your part is the discipline). It should be noted that there is not a single instance in New Testament teaching on “holiness” where we are taught to “depend on the Holy Spirit” without a corresponding exercise of “discipline on our part.” The exercise of “discipline” is often an “agonizing struggle” – because not everything God asks us to do is “easy” – and for that reason many believers get discouraged and give up. Here is where the believer must “put in the effort” to overcome the temptation to give up – the chastening of the Lord will ultimately move the believer toward action, but it is not wise to always take the “detour” to holiness – because it is a lot more painful and frustrating. Let’s review: Our part is to work, but we must do so relying upon God to enable us to do what He asks – God’s work does not make our effort unnecessary, rather it makes it effective. At this point it might be helpful to reflect upon the words of the great Puritan writer John Owen –

Our duty and God’s grace are nowhere opposed in the matter of sanctification – we cannot perform our duty without the grace of God; nor does God give His grace for any other purpose than that we may perform our duty.

If we are to make any progress in the “pursuit of holiness,” we must assume our responsibility to discipline or train ourselves. But we are to do all this in “total dependence on the Holy Spirit” to work in us and strengthen us in Christ. Paul said, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). Some ask: “Why doesn’t the Holy Spirit always strengthen us?” There may be several reasons why He doesn’t – He may be letting us see the sinfulness of our own hearts… He may want us to see how weak we are in ourselves and how dependent we really are on Him… He may be curbing a tendency toward spiritual pride and causing us to grow in humility. Whatever the reason, which we may never know, our responsibility is to utterly depend on Him. More wisdom from John Owen –

Even though we have been given a new heart and the principle of spiritual life, that new life needs to be continually nourished and sustained by the Holy Spirit — it does not operate on its own.

Jesus said, “Apart from Me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5) – In theory we believe that, but in practice we tend to live as if we can do some things – each of us has areas of our lives where we feel fairly confident, and we don’t sense the need of the Holy Spirit’s aid. But that is contrary to what Scripture teaches – we cannot do anything “spiritually good” apart from the working of God’s Spirit within us. If we are going to make any progress in becoming “more Christlike,” we will have to learn to rely on the Holy Spirit rather than on our own virtues and abilities. How do we grow in a conscious sense of dependence on Christ? Through the discipline of “prayer” – prayer is the tangible expression of our dependence on God. Think about that. Obviously, if our prayer life is meager, in effect we are saying that we can handle most of our spiritual life. One of the chief characteristics of our flesh is having an attitude of “independence toward God.” Undoubtedly, one of the reasons God allows us to fall to temptation so often, is to teach us experientially that we really are “dependent on Him” to enable us to grow in holiness. So if we want to become holy we must pursue, not a spirit of independence, but a “spirit of dependence” – and the best means God has given us for doing this is the discipline of “prayer.” (127-143)

If we hope to make any progress in the pursuit of holiness, “commitment” is absolutely essential. Paul’s call to commitment in Romans 12:1 is this: “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your reasonable service of worship.” We cannot control what our eyes look at, what our mouths speak, or what our hands and feet do, if our whole being, including our mind and heart, is not committed to God. In short, it is a commitment to a life
of obedience – we must make it our firm intention not to sin willfully. Therefore, we must keep reminding ourselves of the “gospel of grace” every day, because it is only by grace whereby God’s Spirit will give us the victory. Furthermore, it is only through making the right choice to obey God’s Word that we will break the habits of sin and develop habits of holiness. This is where we desperately need the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to make right choices. So cry out to God every day for “His help” (Mt 26:41), and then cry out again each time you are confronted with the choice to sin or to obey.

**Saying NO to sin involves a struggle between what we “know” to be right, and what we “desire” to do.** Paul describes the struggle thus: “The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; they are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things you feel like doing” (Gal 5:17). Since mortification is a difficult work, we need the help of other brothers (or sisters) in Christ to engage in the struggle with us, and who are also willing to be mutually open with us about their own struggles. This act of “humility” results in an outpouring of “God’s grace” upon our lives. In the battle of putting sin to death, we need the “mutual encouragement and prayer support” of others – that is why “spiritual synergism” is so often taught in the New Testament. For example, we are to admonish one another (Col 3:16); encourage one another (Heb 3:13); confess our sins to one another (Jam 5:16); bear one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2); and pray for one another (Jam 5:16). We each need at least “one brother” to walk and encourage and admonish and pray with us through the spiritual struggles of life. And yet all the while we must keep going back to the “gospel of grace” – because it continually gives us the courage to get up and keep going even after we have failed for the umpteenth time. It is only “grace” that will allow us to be as honest about our sin as David was about his. It will only come from the gratitude and joy of knowing that however miserably I have failed, God’s grace is greater than my sin. The only cure for spiritual pollution is to preach the “gospel of grace” to yourself – preach it to yourself every day! because it is only the gospel that will keep you living by grace! (145-200)

**An old Pogo cartoon years ago expressed it well, “We have met the enemy and it is us!”** – Paul called the “indwelling sin” in us a law, or a principle, that is at work within us constantly seeking to draw us away from God and into sin (Rom 7:21-25). James referred to this “principle of sin” when he said, “Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust” (Jam 1:14). The evil desire within us constantly searches for occasions to express itself – the “flesh” wants to be its own boss and satisfy itself; it has no desire whatsoever to submit to the lordship of Christ – none! There is the sober warning of Paul: “If you think you stand, take heed lest you fall!” (1 Cor 10:12). And then the words of John Owen: “When indwelling sin is least felt, it is in fact most powerful!” The truth of the matter is this: “There is no sin which I am not capable of committing!” As Jerry Bridges said, “Our only safeguard is a sense of deep humility as we realize how powerful indwelling sin still is.” And again John Owen: “When we realize a constant enemy of the soul abides within us, what diligence and watchfulness we should have!” Some years ago Jerry Bridges began to pray this prayer – “Lord, keep me on a short leash; don’t let me get away with the little sins.” A prayer I often pray is this: “Lord, give me neither riches that I deny You, nor poverty that I would steal” (Prv 30:8-9) – this means being continually mindful that I can have “too much” or “too little” of anything; that I need to trust God to give me only whatever is necessary – and to accept it joyfully. (201-231)