

# PERSPECTIVE

SEPTEMBER 2016

## Edward Hiscox: A NEW ENGLAND PASTOR



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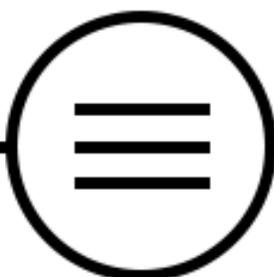
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## Edward Hiscox: A New England Pastor

What if you could rent a time machine and travel back to 1814? Many of the people you'd run into on the street would have vivid memories of the Revolutionary War. Their newspapers would be filled with accounts of Napoleon's battles. Closer to home, the War of 1812 still shook American soil with skirmishes in Alexandria, Virginia and Baltimore. In fact, if your time machine took you to Baltimore's Fort McHenry, where the British failed, you'd have seen the battle that inspired Francis Scott Key to write *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

If you could travel back to 1814, you probably wouldn't notice a young pastor's wife giving birth to a son who would grow up to be an important Baptist pastor in his generation, Edward Thurston Hiscox. Hiscox is practically forgotten by our generation. In his lifetime, he lacked the fame of England's Charles Spurgeon, the prince of preachers. But he served churches and Christians well by faithfully laboring in several cities, preaching the gospel, evangelizing the lost, and caring for church members in need. Hiscox sought to be a blessing to other pastors and churches as well, devoting much of his ministry to writing and editing *The Baptist Church Directory*. Those who think of him today, remember him for this particular book.

I spent a few weeks in the summer of 2016 getting to know Edward Hiscox. There was something strangely refreshing sitting back and reading the sermons and books of a man who ministered at a different time but was devoted to the same task of pastoral ministry. For a few pages, I'd like to introduce him to you, too. Maybe as you learn a little about Hiscox, you'll better appreciate the ministry of the pastor and the ministry God has called you to as a member of a local church.

### DEEP CONVICTION

Hiscox came from a family committed to biblical truth. His grandfather, William Hiscox, was the first seventh-day Baptist pastor in the United States. Seventh-day Baptists believed Saturday is the Christian Sabbath. They thought it sinful *not* to gather on Saturday for corporate worship. Therefore they split off from their regular Baptist brothers and sisters. Like many Americans in the eighteenth century, William Hiscox cared deeply about the Bible. He wanted to remain

faithful to Scripture even if that meant striking out on his own to found a new church.

Of course, America was started by people who wanted to found new churches. The Puritans left England because they couldn't tolerate the worship of the English state church. They wanted the freedom to be part of a "pure" and simple church. These Puritans were also called Separatists because they separated from the Church of England. However, the Puritans were no friends of religious liberty. They aligned the church they began in the colonies with the local government, requiring church membership as a condition of citizenship. This was bad news for Baptists who, in good conscience, could not be part of a Puritan church that demanded the practice of infant baptism.

Can you imagine how hard it must have been to be a Puritan and break away from the Church of England? It was even harder for Baptist Puritans, who rejected infant baptism, to break away once again. Not only did they find themselves without church homes, but they were often whipped and imprisoned for their beliefs. William Hiscox took it a step further. He even split from his Baptist friends over the issue of the Lord's Day. Though he was wrong to do this, we can certainly appreciate his integrity. He sought to stand on the Word of God.

Edward's father, Thomas, became a pastor, too, and served in Hopkinton, Rhode Island. Edward, grew up in Westerly, RI, but he did not follow the Seventh-Day Baptist path laid out for him by his father and grandfather. At the age of thirteen, Edward went to live with his older brother. At fifteen, he came to saving faith in Jesus Christ and five years later, the First Baptist Church of Wakefield baptized him. It wasn't unusual for Baptists to postpone baptism until the late teenage years. Parents and churches wanted time to see evidence of genuine conversion. This is probably why Edward waited until he was twenty to be baptized.

The 1830s must have been an exciting time to be a young man in New England. The economy was booming thanks to the rise of steamboats and railroads. His older brother sent him to an fine high school where he excelled. Later, his brother encouraged Edward to try his hand at being an entrepreneur. Hiscox operated a small business for a short period of time in his early 20s, but an economic crisis in 1837 dashed any hope of financial success.

Pastoral ministry had been in the back of Hiscox's mind since becoming a Christian, and First Baptist Wakefield strongly encouraged it. He had a good mind, loved the Bible, and had a heart for the local church. We shouldn't think that Hiscox turned to ministry because he couldn't "cut it" as a businessman. Our God is sovereign over all of our affairs, and maybe the Lord wanted to give Hiscox a taste of work outside the church in order to make him a better pastor. Embracing his calling, Hiscox began to preach regularly, and eventually enrolled in New York's Hamilton Literary and Theological Institution—the first Baptist seminary in America (now Colgate University).

At Hamilton, Hiscox found professors devoted to the gospel, theology, and missions. The school committed itself to sending students to reach the nations with the Good News of Christianity. They knew the only thing that could sustain a faithful missionary in those hard fields would be a firm commitment to the truthfulness, power, and coherence of the Bible. Hiscox undoubtedly sat under the teaching of John Sharp Maginnis, a preeminent biblical theologian in his day. Maginnis taught all of his students to see Christ on every page of Scripture. I can imagine Hiscox sitting in a lecture hall, gripping a pencil and furiously taking notes as Maginnis explains the importance of pointing to Christ:

Whoever will prosecute an attentive study of the sacred volume, cannot be long in perceiving, that all its stupendous judgments, are made with respect to one great Personage, the Mediator between God and ruined man, the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world, who liveth, and was dead, and is alive forevermore. It may justly be said, therefore, that the specific object of Biblical Theology, is to acquaint us, with the pre-eminence which the Bible assigns to the character and offices of Christ as the Redeemer of lost sinners.<sup>1</sup>

From Maginnis, Hiscox learned a great deal about Christ and the cross; but Maginnis also taught his students to beware of lusting after church growth. Maginnis had been a pastor himself, and he knew the temptations of watering down the gospel to get more and more people satisfied and sitting in the pew. He warned his pastors-in-training not to slide down that slippery slope. With great gentleness, Maginnis encouraged careful discipleship:

If I might be permitted to utter a word of affectionate warning, upon a subject, in reference to which I feel the deepest solicitude, I would say, in the spirit of Christian love, let our churches beware how they

multiply in numbers while they disregard the proper instruction of those whom they receive. The triumph of the gospel does not consist of collecting men into the church, but in bringing their hearts under the dominion of truth, and securing in their lives the peaceable fruits of righteousness.<sup>2</sup>

This is a word we need to hear today—church pastors and members alike. God is not pleased when we teach anything other than his Word. Leave that to the schools, businesses and, government. It is the duty of the church to preach Genesis to Revelation by faithfully explaining what the Bible means and carefully applying it to our daily lives.

Hiscox received a wealth of knowledge at Hamilton. He was taught by professors of deep conviction, and Hiscox proved to be a pastor with deep conviction, as well. In his lifetime, many churches shifted from relying wholly on Scripture and some began ignoring Scripture altogether. By God's grace, Hiscox took Maginnis' words to heart and taught the Bible all the days of his life.

## SPIRIT LED REVIVALS

Some of you may have grown up in churches that held revival-meetings. They often put up a tent and invited a guest preacher to spend a few evenings preaching the gospel. Every neighbor in the country, village, or city would be invited to hear, and many were surely saved.

Many of the revival-meetings we've seen in our lifetime are an attempt to bring back the revivals that swept America during the early nineteenth-century. For whatever reason, the Spirit of God seemed to blow through churches in that time, bringing a conviction of sin that led to genuine repentance and faith. Of course, charlatans sought to take advantage of these movements by manufacturing revivals and manipulating people into making decisions for Christ. Many other preachers simply did what they always did—plainly preached the Word of God, only to see tremendous spiritual fruit.

As a young man, still in seminary, Hiscox visited a friend's church in Rhode Island. Hiscox planned to stay just a few hours, but his friend invited him to preach that evening. Hiscox did and saw there was such a hunger for the Word in the community that Hiscox stayed and preached another night. This kept going for nearly three weeks! The Spirit of God worked, bringing many souls to saving faith in Christ.

For the first half of his ministry, Hiscox experienced more revivals, but he strongly encouraged churches never to wait for them. It's not our job to expect God to do an extraordinary work. It is our job, Hiscox insisted, simply to preach and pray, "the churches indeed should not wait for special times, but remain in a constant attitude of prayer, 'O Lord, revive thy work.'"<sup>3</sup>

This should be our prayer too. Let's ask that through the ordinary means of grace: preaching, praying, and gathering, God would revive his work in our midst.

After seminary, Hiscox pastored congregations in Rhode Island and Connecticut. Eventually he landed in New York City, at Stanton Street Baptist Church. He served there from 1852-1866 at the very end of the Second Great Awakening. An especially powerful work of the Spirit erupted around 1856 when a group of businessmen gathered to pray every lunch hour. As they prayed, men and women streamed into evangelical churches of all denominations. The preached Word landed on soft hearts. While all this took place, Hiscox exhorted his fellow pastors to remember that the power of the Holy Spirit is not in the eloquence of the preacher but the truthfulness of his message:

What gives the Pulpit its mysterious power? We answer, it is the Gospel in the preaching—it is the combined power of the Spirit and the Word, in the ministrations—it is Christ in the Pulpit, the strange secret of its might. This makes the Gospel ministry an institution unequalled and unconquerable.<sup>4</sup>

Hiscox was just forty-two when revival hit New York City. It didn't come with the oily message of cheap grace. Hiscox preached about God's coming wrath and the power of the cross of Jesus Christ to save. "Christ can destroy as well as save," Hiscox said from the Stanton Street pulpit. "Be not disheartened. The arm extended on the cross is mighty to save." But the cross will only save those who repent and believe. New York City was, and continues to be, known as a sophisticated town full of movers and shakers; but Hiscox knew they needed the gospel. And so he boldly preached the Word:

Your soul will sink lower than the grave unless washed in the blood of atonement . . . except you receive pardon through the dying love of Christ, and are justified, by the merits of his sacrifice, a fire shall be kindled that will burn to the lowest hell, and consume unbelievers as the stubble of the field.<sup>5</sup>

Hiscox didn't mince any words. He spoke with compassion. He wanted everyone in his audience to be aware of both the price of salvation and the cost of neglecting such a great Savior. However, Hiscox was not satisfied simply seeing men, women, and children make *decisions* for Christ. A decision was worthless if unaccompanied by a *changed* life. Revival meetings can be organized, but only revivals organized by the Spirit lead to profound, internal and external change. When the Spirit and Word break into a man's heart, he is forever a new creation. Hiscox promoted genuine revival by expecting true believers to live genuinely revived lives. Hiscox didn't care if people *enjoyed* a message. He wanted to know if the message *transformed* them:

The Gospel does not condescend to *please* men. It has a higher aim. It conquers them. The true question as to its effect on the man is: Does it make him better? Does it excite penitence and prayer? Does it give him a deeper sense of self-abasement in the sight of God, and encourage meekness and humility in the sight of men? Does it make him more devout in spirit and more holy in heart, and multiply his charities and alms-deeds to the needy? Under its gracious influence, do his works of faith and labors of love abound? And by its ministry, does he find himself gaining victory over himself and the world, and becoming more conformed to the spirit and temper of Christ?<sup>6</sup>

The goal of preaching is changed lives. Isn't it interesting how the problems Hiscox saw and addressed in the 1850s are like the problems the church must continue to address today? It's easy to rest in the thought that you walked an aisle, made a decision, or experienced a baptism; but no Christian is called to rest in any of our actions. We are to rest in what Christ has done. And all who truly rest in Christ, all who have been, as Hiscox put it *conquered* by the gospel, will live gloriously different lives. By their character, they will give testimony to the truth of the gospel.

### CAREFUL AND CARING CHURCHES

While at Stanton Street, Hiscox wrote the work that would help chart the course of his life, *The Baptist Church Directory*. He wanted to see churches that were careful to follow the instructions of Scripture and churches caring toward the members entrusted to their care.

In his *Church Directory*, Hiscox touched upon an exhaustive range of topics related to church life: officers, ordinances, services, worship, government, membership, discipline, business, mission, customs, duties, privileges, piety, and doctrines. He left no stone unturned. In less than 300 pages he outlined what he thought every pastor should know about the church. It came out first in 1859, but by 1894 sixty thousand copies had been sold. It has been translated into several languages and put to use on the mission field.

Hiscox didn't think teaching on the church was for pastors only. He sought to make his work available to the person in the pew. From *The Baptist Church Directory* he produced many pamphlet-sized works called the Star Book series. For just a few cents, a lay reader could learn what the Bible says about baptism, the Lord's Supper, church membership, and prayer meetings. Nearly 200,000 of these slim volumes floated around churches and living rooms throughout America.

Hiscox believed the future of the church depended upon everyday Christians knowing what the church is and is not. He defined it this way:

A Christian church is a *congregation of baptized believers in Christ*, worshipping together; associated in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel; practising its precepts; observing its ordinances; recognizing and receiving Christ as their supreme lawgiver and ruler; and taking his Word as their sufficient and exclusive rule of faith and practice, in all matters of religion.<sup>7</sup>

Such a definition might not make a lot of sense to someone who thinks of the church as a social club, a social-service agency, or an entertainment center. A church is a gathering of those who have been born-again and baptized as a result. A church is for the corporate worship of a body of believers. A church is centered on the gospel. A church is for those committed to obeying what the Bible teaches, celebrating baptism and the Lord's Supper, and always bending the knee to Christ. A church is only a church if the Bible is seen as "the sufficient and exclusive rule of faith and practice." In other words, a church is where we agree that if the Bible says it, God says it!

Perhaps the words of his old professor, John Sharp Maginnis, still rang in Hiscox's ears when he wrote that churches need to be careful not to draw a crowd through entertainment. Genuine disciples are only made by faithful preaching. Such preaching, "is not to entertain or

recreate an audience, nor to crowd houses with unprofited hearers; nor to build up wealthy or fashionable congregations; nor to teach science, literature, or art; nor to secure temporal prosperity to the church; but to *save souls* by an exhibition of Christ crucified." Hiscox insisted, "all preaching which fails of this fails of its great design and end."<sup>8</sup>

This line of thinking, undergirded by passages in Scripture that teach on the importance of holiness (Rom 6:1-12; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 9:24-27; Gal 5:16-26; Eph 5:1-21; Phil 3:12-16; Col 3:1-17; 1 Thess 4:1-12; Titus 2:1-15; 1 Peter 1:13-21; 1 John 1:5-10) explains why Hiscox took church membership so seriously. He called churches "brotherhoods of faith and affection." They are places to live out the faith, surrounded by brothers and sisters who love and care for you.

Hiscox maintained that church membership is not optional. Every Christian is under a "moral obligation" to join a church because "it is one of the appointed means of grace." God, Hiscox argued, "has ordained that His followers should associate themselves together."

It is because church membership is so important that Hiscox took such care with the process of joining and leaving a church. Most of us have heard about people joining a church "by letter"—though it probably seems fairly archaic to our twenty-first century ears. For Hiscox, and the majority of Baptist churches in his era, a member who moved out of the area received a letter of recommendation from the church. The letter communicated to another church something like this:

This person has been a faithful member of our church and we are happy to vouch for the sincerity of his profession of faith. We have seen evidence of the Spirit's work in his life and we happily commend them to your church for membership.

Again, how strange it is for us to even think that our membership in a local church should depend upon a reference from another church body, but it was not unusual to this generation of Christians. They saw God's church as a divine gift to them, and they believed God uses churches to reassure us that our walk with the Lord is real. Ultimately, assurance is a gift of the Holy Spirit, but the church is another gift used by God to testify to the genuineness of our faith.

When someone leaves a church, Hiscox argued, eventually the congregation is no longer able to provide such testimony. The wonderful assurance that comes with church membership is a boots-on-the-ground kind of ministry. The longer someone is away and uninvolved in the life of a church, the harder it is to know if that person is still in fellowship with the Lord. For this reason, Hiscox called for these letters of recommendation to have an expiration date. They were to last only for a few months, at which time the old church would simply be unable to testify to the state of a person's spiritual health. And if a person were to leave and refuse to join another church, Hiscox advocated excommunication. Non-attendance, he insisted, is disobedience to the Lord's command. Persistently neglecting the church, Hiscox argued, is evidence of unrepentance.

I've pastored long enough to know that talk about membership standards and requirements can seem harsh, unloving, and legalistic. In American history, Christians have often seen it as just the opposite: gentle, loving, and full of grace! The care pastors and congregations take to help their members see the importance of accountability is truly a wonderful gift from a kind God who loves us enough to call us to live together in families of faith.

Even in Hiscox's day, churches began to stray from this careful and caring practice of church membership and discipline. Hiscox was not pleased. He wondered if the desire for bigger church buildings and offerings made pastors lower the standards for membership and stop the practice of church discipline. Hiscox called churches to recommit to the task of knowing their members and of shepherding them, when necessary, to other faithful churches where they could be fed and loved equally well. Again, he saw this as the most loving and kind thing a pastor could ever do for a pilgrim walking along the journey of faith:

This kind care points out dangers to be avoided, and mercies to be obtained. It kindly takes by the hand, and gently leads, along life's rough places, the weak and the fainting; and in the spirit of the good shepherd, seeks out and restores the straying ones of the flock.<sup>9</sup>

## LOVING THE SHEEP

Where did Hiscox obtain such a commitment to careful and caring membership? Though the answer must be the Bible, an event he witnessed as a young man played a part in shaping his view of pastoral ministry.

One day in the summer of 1842, Hiscox visited the church of Albert Palmer, a dear friend of his who had just been installed as the pastor of a church in Hiscox's hometown of Westerly. On this day the Lord was adding twenty new converts to this small church—evidence of a revival. As was the custom of the day, the twenty young Christians stood up to receive the right hand of fellowship from the pastor. Before Palmer could officially greet each one of them and say a few words in their honor, he began to cry. Hiscox later noted how Palmer had been “overcome by a sense of the goodness of God in having given him such evidence that his work and labor of love was not in vain in the Lord.” Indeed, God had given twenty new souls into Palmer's care. This young pastor not only saw the blessing of God's provision, but the profound responsibility to serve them well.

Hiscox saw all of this from the pew: the zeal of the soon-to-be-members and the love of a pastor for his sheep. The sight of Palmer, unable to speak and with tears in his eyes, shook Hiscox to his core. He remembered that moment for the rest of his life and in 1894 he explained just what an impression that scene had made:

On me the effect was inexpressible. Never before nor since have I been more touched with a sense of the blessedness of the ministerial calling, and the reward of the pastor's work as he sees his labors bearing fruit in the salvation of souls, converts won from the world and sin, joyful in him who loved them and gave himself up for them.<sup>10</sup>

I wonder what you think when you see the Lord add a believer to our church. Are you overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God in building a church for our good and his glory? Are you struck by the awesome responsibility we share in caring for them, even as we ask them to care for us? Do you rejoice in the fact that that new member is evidence that God has conquered sin and death, yet again, in this fallen and failing world?

Hiscox will not be well-remembered. He did little more than pastor a few churches and write a few words on the importance of church membership; but his story is worth re-telling. He reminds each of us, pastors and church members alike, that the church is not to be trifled with.

Each of us has a special role to play in the church of the living God. It is neither wise nor loving to take our participation in the body of Christ lightly. God has been kind enough to knit us together. Let's now live together to the praise of his glorious grace.

—Aaron Menikoff

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<sup>1</sup> John S. Maginnis, *An Inaugural Address Delivered in the Chapel of the Hamilton Literary and Theological Institution*, 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Edward T. Hiscox, *A Memorial to Albert Gallatin Palmer*, 89-90.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem.*, *Gospel Ministrations: Their True Purpose and Real Value*, Circular Letter read at the Sixth Anniversary of the Hudson River Association South, 1856. Minutes of the Hudson River South Association, volume 1850-59, 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem.*, "The Cross Contemplated," in *The New York Pulpit in the Revival of 1858*. Edited by James Alexander. New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, & Co., 1858, 274.

<sup>6</sup> *Gospel Ministrations*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Edward T. Hiscox, *The Baptist Church Directory* (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1859), 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

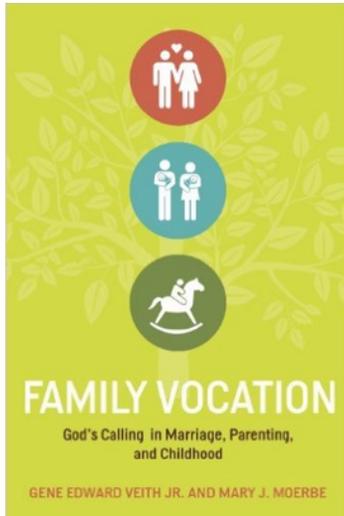
<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-142.

<sup>10</sup> *Albert Palmer*, 51.

## ***Family Vocation: God's Calling in Marriage, Parenting, and Childhood***

Written by Gene Edward Veith Jr. and Mary J. Moerbe

Bookstall Price \$17



“How was your day? What did you do at work today?” It is a common question in every household over the dinner table. Its implication is that the work day is over and now it's time to rest. But according to Gene Veith and Mary Moerbe in their book *Family Vocation: God's Calling in Marriage, Parenting, and Childhood*, the work day is still in full swing. Instead of viewing our work, or vocation, as what we do from 9 to 5 to earn a living, this book helps us to see the work God has given us as we daily live together as spouses, parents and children, as our primary vocation; it is

a spiritual vocation. So in a sense, this book is like a continuing education course for the Christian that instructs us to fill our days with the work of loving and serving one another, for the glory of God, and to submit to the work the Lord is doing through others to grow our faith.

This book both encouraged and challenged me. First, it was reassuring for me to be reminded of the Lord's care for me through my relationships with my parents, siblings, husband and children. He has providentially placed me in this family and has worked to shape my faith through them. As I have laughed, cried, fought and grieved with my family, it was the Lord who was working through them to teach me, to point out my sin, to comfort and to encourage me in disappointment. At the same time, this book has challenged me to remember my daily work is first to serve and show God's love to the ones He has called me to be closest to Him in this life. This reality will greatly change the way you fill your calendar! In addition, for those who have strained relationships with their parents or children, this book provides a comforting reminder that our responsibility is to continue on in love and forgiveness. All of us can be encouraged by this book to press on to love our families well, “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Phil. 2:13)

– RECOMMENDED BY CAROLYN ROBERTS

### Excerpts from the Book

## 1

“According to the doctrine of vocation, God remains intimately involved in everything that he has made, and he stays close to his loved ones in part by the means of human love.”

–Vocation in the Nourishing Estate, p. 23

## 2

“The work of our vocations [in our families] is also a “spiritual activity” that God specifically calls us to.”

–Vocation in the Nourishing Estate, p. 30

## 3

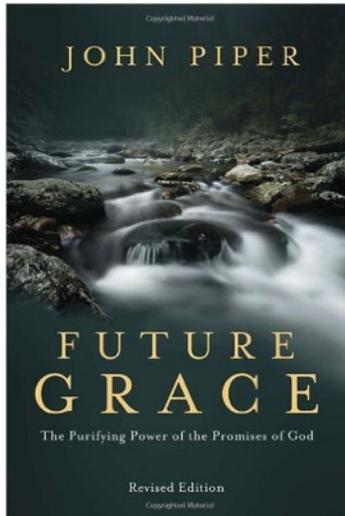
“The doctrine of vocation encourages parents to consider that they have followed their calling the best they could and to leave the outcome in God's hands.”

–The Crosses of Parenthood, p. 163

## ***Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God***

Written by John Piper

Bookstall Price \$11



“Living by faith in future grace” is an idea woven into every chapter of John Piper’s *Future Grace*. Piper makes the claim that the key to fighting sin is to battle unbelief. He spends 400 pages emphasizing that “believing the promises of God is the essential thing in saving, life-changing faith.” (201) Throughout this book are the intertwined realities of “faith” and “grace.” We need transformative faith that comes from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and His primary mode of empowerment, the Holy Spirit.

Why read this? Piper admits that 31 chapters are not an accident and intends for the book to be read in a devotional format so readers can spend some time each day meditating on grace during any given month. For the Christian who continues to get discouraged by struggles and challenges, Piper dives into plenty of Scriptural truths to explain what this living faith looks like practically as he intermixes the meat of his teaching points with eight application heavy chapters to address such matters as anxiety, pride, covetousness and bitterness. I would recommend *Future Grace* for anyone who needs to be reminded of the work the Holy Spirit is actively doing in the life of believers and how to apply this future grace, not only to the new heavens and earth, but tomorrow at work, with challenging family relationships and even living life together in a church setting with grace-filled but sinful believers.

– RECOMMENDED BY JUSTIN WELTSCHIEFF

### Excerpts from the Book

## 1

“In other words, we learn that grace is not merely a past reality but a future one. Every time I reach for the Bible, God’s grace is a reality that will flow to me. Every time I put the Bible down and go about my business, God’s grace will go with me. That is what I mean by future grace.”

–The Life That’s Left Is Future Grace, p. 65

## 2

“Rather we will glorify the all-sufficiency of the Cross and the terrible justice of hell by living in the assurance that God, and not we, will set all wrongs right. Ours is to love. God’s is to settle accounts justly. And faith in future grace is the key to freedom and forgiveness.”

–Faith in Future Grace vs. Bitterness, p. 269

## 3

“It is not complicated: If the heart is satisfied with all that God is for us in Jesus, the power of sin to lure us away from the will of Christ is broken, and the beauty of God’s path of love is compelling.”

–Creating Love in a Desire Factory, p. 282



<sup>[17]</sup> Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. <sup>[18]</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>[19]</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

-Romans 12:17-19

“Sally, why did you hit Johnny?”  
“Johnny hit me first.”

Parents, children’s ministry workers and anyone who works with children in any capacity see this scenario played out over and over again. What lies behind Sally’s reaction to what Johnny did? The answer is a good and right desire for justice; but that good and right desire gets twisted, corrupted by sin and leads to a sinful response. So, rather than seeking justice from an authority outside herself (a parent, teacher, etc.), Sally decides to take matters into her own hands and in the process returns evil for evil, sin for sin.

This phenomenon is not unique to children. All of us, young and old alike, fall prey to the same temptation. When wronged by another we seek to respond in kind. Instead of seeking justice, we seek revenge. We return evil for evil. The only difference is that the older we get, the more complex and calculated our sinful responses become, and the more convinced we are that those responses are justified.

In Romans 12:17-19, Paul commands us to resist the temptation to repay evil for evil. Recognizing the difficulty that we face in resisting this temptation, he

doesn’t just give commands. Instead, he couples the commands with reasons why we are to obey them.

We are to repay no one evil for evil because the world is watching how we respond (v. 17-18). Our character as Christians is intended to show something of the character of God to the watching world (Matthew 5:16). To refuse to repay evil for evil brings glory to God because it reveals his honorable character to those who witness our restraint. When wronged, we are to give thought to the fact that our God and Savior was reviled, but did not revile in return (1 Peter 2:23). And we are to follow in his footsteps by his grace, living honorably and peaceably for his glory.

We are never to avenge ourselves because vengeance belongs to the Lord (v. 19). God will punish sin (Exodus 34:7). When someone commits an evil against us, we must remember that his or her sin is ultimately sin against the Lord, and it is therefore his to punish as he sees fit. Vengeance is his, not ours. To refuse to take vengeance into our own hands is to trust the character of God as he has revealed himself in his Word.

Both reasons Paul gives point us to the gospel, which is the chief motivation for our obedience to these commands (Romans 12:1). Vengeance is the Lord’s, and for those of us who are in Christ, he has chosen not to pour our out his just wrath on us, but rather to pour it out on his Son. Instead of his vengeance, we have received his mercy. Instead of returning evil for our evil, he has blessed us beyond all comparison. May we respond to those who commit evils against us in light of his mercy and grace.

– DUSTIN BUTTS

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