

The Ragamuffin Gospel

Title: *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up and Burnt Out*

Author: Brennan Manning

Copyright Date: 2000

Book Summary:

Many believers feel stunted in their Christian growth. We beat ourselves up over our failures and, in the process, pull away from God because we subconsciously believe He tallies our defects and hangs His head in disappointment. In this repackaged edition—now with full appendix, study questions, and the author’s own epilogue on “Ragamuffin Ten Years Later”—Brennan Manning reminds us that nothing could be further from the truth. The Father beckons us to Himself with a “furious love” that burns brightly and constantly. Only when we truly embrace God’s grace can we bask in the joy of a gospel that enfolds the most needy of His flock—the “ragamuffins.”

Book Quotes:

The bending of the mind by the powers of this world has twisted the gospel of grace into religious bondage and distorted the image of God into an eternal, small-minded bookkeeper...Put bluntly, the American church today accepts grace in theory but denies it in practice. (16)

“Justification by grace through faith” is the theologian’s learned phrase for what Chesterton once called “the furious love of God.” He is not moody or capricious; He knows no seasons of change. He has a single relentless stance toward us: He loves us. (20)

Here is revelation bright as the evening star: Jesus comes for sinners, for those as outcast as tax collectors and for those caught up in squalid choices and failed dreams. He comes for corporate executives, street people, superstars, farmers, hookers, addicts, IRS agents, AIDS victims, and even used-car salesmen. (22)

The Good News means we can stop lying to ourselves. The sweet sound of amazing grace saves us from the necessity of self-deception. (23)

To live by grace means to acknowledge my whole life story, the light side and the dark. In admitting my shadow side, I learn who I am and what God’s grace means. (25)

The Good News of the gospel of grace cries out: We are all, equally, privileged but unentitled beggars at the door of God’s mercy! (26)

Jesus comes not for the super-spiritual but for the wobbly and the week-kneed who know they don’t have it all together, and who are not too proud to accept the handout of amazing grace. (28)

If your God is an impersonal cosmic force, your religion will be noncommittal and vague. The image of God as an omnipotent thug who brooks no human intervention creates a rigid lifestyle ruled by puritanical laws and dominated by fear. (41)

We must never allow the authority of books, institutions, or leaders to replace the authority of knowing Jesus Christ personally and directly. When the religious views of others interpose between us and the primary experience of Jesus as the Christ, we become unconvicted and unpersuasive travel agents handing out brochures to places we have never visited. (44-45)

Jesus' preference for little people and partiality toward ragamuffins is an irrefutable fact of the gospel narrative. (52)

Evangelical faith is bartered for cozy, comfortable piety. A failure of nerve and unwillingness to risk distorts God into a Bookkeeper, and the gospel of grace is swapped for the security of religious bondage. (65)

Because we never lay hold of our nothingness before God, and consequently, we never enter into the deepest reality of our relationship with Him. But when we accept ownership of our powerless and helplessness, when we acknowledge that we are paupers at the door of God's mercy, then God can make something beautiful out of us. (79)

The deeper we grow in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the poorer we become—the more we realize that everything in life is a gift. (81)

Honesty is such a precious commodity that it is seldom found in the world or the church. Honesty requires the truthfulness to admit the attachment and addictions that control our attention, dominate our consciousness, and function as false gods. I can be addicted to vodka or to being nice, to marijuana or being loved, to cocaine or being right, to gambling or relationships, to golf or gossiping. Perhaps my addiction is food, performance, money, popularity, power, revenge, reading, television, tobacco, weight, or winning. When we give anything more priority than we give to God, we commit idolatry. Thus we all commit idolatry countless times every day. (85)

By and large, our world has lost its sense of wonder. (90)

A story is told about Fiorello LaGuardia, who, when he was mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and all of World War II, was called "the Little Flower" by adoring New Yorkers because he was only five foot four and always wore a carnation in his lapel. He was a colorful character who used to ride the New York City fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police department, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and whenever the New York newspapers were on strike, he would go on the radio and read the Sunday funnies to the kids.

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. "It's a bad neighborhood, Your Honor," the man told the mayor. "She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson."

LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions—ten dollars or ten days in jail. But even as he pronounced the sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous sombrero, saying, "Here is the ten dollar fine, which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

So the following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of that amount being

contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so gave the mayor a standing ovation.

What an extraordinary moment of grace for everyone present in that courtroom! The grace of God operates at a profound level in the life of a loving person. Oh, that we would recognize God's grace when it comes to us. (94)

How do we live in the presence of the living God? In wonder, amazed by the traces of God all around us. (96)

It is only the reality of death that is powerful enough to quicken people out of the sluggishness of everyday life and into an active search for what life is really about. (98)

The spirituality of wonder knows the world is charged with grace, that while sin and war, disease and death are terribly real, God's loving presence and power in our midst are even more real. (99)

Christianity happens when men and women accept with unwavering trust that their sins have not only been forgiven but forgotten, washed away in the blood of the Lamb. (119)

Only love empowers the leap in trust, the courage to risk everything on Jesus, the readiness to move into the darkness guided only by a pillar of fire. Trust clings to the belief that whatever happens in our life is designed to teach us holiness. The love of Christ inspires trust to thank God for the nagging headache, the arthritis that is so painful, the spiritual darkness that envelops us; to say with Job, "If we take happiness from God's hand, must we not take sorrow too?" (Job 2:10); to pray, with Charles Foucauld: *Abba, I abandon myself into your hands. Do with me what you will. Whatever You may do, I thank you. I am ready for all: I accept all. Let your will be done in me and in all your creatures. I wish no more than this, O Lord. Into your hands I commend my spirit. I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you, Lord, and I give myself, surrender myself into your hands without reserve, with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.*

A Bahamian priest related a story that captures the essence of biblical trust: *A two-story house had caught fire. The family—father, mother, several children—were on their way out when the smallest boy became terrified, tore away from his mother, ran back upstairs. Suddenly he appeared at a smoke-filled window, crying like crazy. His father, outside, shouted, "Jump, son, jump! I'll catch you." The boy cried, "But daddy, I can't see you." I know," his father called, "I know. But I can see you." (121)*

The ministry of evangelization is an extraordinary opportunity of showing gratitude to Jesus by passing on His gospel of grace to others. However, the "conversion by concussion" method, with one sledgehammer blow of the Bible after another, betrays a basic disrespect for the dignity of the other and is utterly alien to the gospel imperative to bear witness. To evangelize a person is to say to him or her, *You, too, are loved by God in the Lord Jesus.* And not only to say it but to really think it and relate it to the man or woman so they can sense it. This is what it means to announce the Good News. *But that becomes possible only offering the person your friendship—a friendship that is real, unselfish, without condescension, full of confidence, and profound esteem. (124)*

Self-deception mortgages our sinfulness and prevents us from seeing ourselves as we really are—ragamuffins. (126)

The noonday devil of the Christian life is the temptation to lose the inner self while preserving the shell of edifying behavior. At some unremembered moment I have lost connection between internal purity of heart and external works of piety. In the most humiliating sense of the word, I have become a legalist. I have fallen victim to what T.S. Eliot calls the greatest sin: to do the right thing for the wrong reason. (135)

Biblically, there is nothing more detestable than a self-righteous disciple. He is so swollen with conceit that his mere presence is unbearable. (137)

The way we are with each other is the truest test of our faith. How I treat a brother or sister from day to day, how I react to the sin-scarred wino on the street, how I respond to interruptions from people I dislike, how I deal with normal people in their normal confusion on a normal day may be a better indication of my reverence for life than the antiabortion sticker on the bumper of my car. (141)

But to stand in the truth before God and one another has a unique reward. It is the reward which a sense of reality always brings: I know something extremely precious. I am in touch with myself as I am. My tendency to play the pseudo-messiah is torpedoed. (143)

Sad but true: Some Christians want to be slaves. It is easier to let others make decisions or to rely upon the letter of the law. (146)

Sadly, many today are not experiencing what Paul calls “the same glorious freedom as the children of God” (Romans 8:21). The basic problem was stated in the first chapter of this book: We accept grace in theory but deny it in practice. Living by grace rather than law leads us out of the house of fear into the house of love. “In love there is no room for fear, but perfect love drives out fear: because fear implies punishment, and no one who is afraid has come to perfection in love” (1 John 4:18). (147)

Jesus says simply, “Remain in me, as I in you” (John 15:4). Home is not a heavenly mansion in the afterlife but a safe place right in the midst of our anxious world. (148)

Christ’s call on our lives is a call to liberty. Freedom is the cornerstone of Christianity. (151)

Freedom in Christ produces a healthy independence from peer pressure, people-pleasing, and the bondage of human respect. The tyranny of public opinion can manipulate our lives. *What will the neighbors think? What will my friends think?* The expectations of others can exert a subtle but controlling pressure on our behavior. (152)

In Christ Jesus freedom from fear empowers us to let go of the desire to appear good, so that we can move freely in the mystery of who we really are. (152)

For most of us it takes a long time for the Spirit of freedom to cleanse us of the subtle urges to be admired for our studied goodness. It requires a strong sense of our redeemed selves to pass up the opportunity to appear graceful and good to other persons. (153)

Living by grace inspires a growing consciousness that I am what I am in the sight of Jesus and nothing more. It is His approval that counts. (154)

Our eyes reveal whether our souls are spacious or cramped, hospitable or critical, compassionate or judgmental. The way we see other people is usually the way we see ourselves. If we have made peace with our flawed humanity and embraced our ragamuffin identity, we are able to tolerate in others what was previously unacceptable in ourselves. (157)

Anne Tyler’s heroine in her Pulitzer Prize—winning novel, *Breathing Lessons*, is driving along a country road with her husband at the wheel. Suddenly, this middle-aged woman cries out, “O Ira, what are we going to do with the rest of our lives?” This is the question of the second journey...Second journeys usually end quietly with a new wisdom and a coming to a true sense of self that releases great power. The wisdom is that of an adult who has regained equilibrium, stabilized, and found fresh purpose and new dreams. It is a wisdom that

gives some things up, lets some things die, and accepts human limitations. It is a wisdom that realizes: *I cannot expect anyone to understand me fully.* It is wisdom that admits the inevitability of old age and death. It is a wisdom that has faced the pain caused by parents, spouse, family, friends, colleagues, business associates, and has truly forgiven them and acknowledged with unexpected compassion that these people are neither angels nor devils, but only human. (164-165)

The second journey begins when we know we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the morning program. We are aware that we only have a limited amount of time left to accomplish that which is really important—and that awareness illumines for us what really matters, what really counts. This conviction provides a new center. (165)

The call asks, *Do you really accept the message that God is head over heels in love with you?* I believe that this question is at the core of our ability to mature and grow spiritually. If in our hearts we really don't believe that God loves us as we are, if we are still tainted by the lie that we can do something to make God love us more, we are rejecting the message of the cross. (165)

Faith means you want God and want to want nothing else. (167)

When God's love is taken for granted, we paint Him into a corner and rob Him of the opportunity to love us in a NEW AND SURPRISING way, and faith begins to shrivel and shrink. (167)

Our hope, our acceptance of the invitation to the banquet, is not based on the idea that we are going to be free of pain and suffering. Rather, it is based on the conviction that we will triumph over suffering. (169)

God wants us back even more than we could possibly want to be back. (172)

The nature of God's love for us is outrageous. Why doesn't this God of ours display some taste and discretion in dealing with us? Why doesn't He show more restraint? To be blunt about it, couldn't God arrange to have a little more dignity? Wow! (173)

No, the love of our God isn't dignified at all, and apparently that's the way He expects our love to be. Not only does He require that we accept His inexplicable, embarrassing kind of love; but once we've accepted it, He expects us to behave the same way with others. I suppose I could live, if I had to, with a God whose love for us is embarrassing, but the thought that I've got to act that way with other people—that's a bit too much to swallow. (173)

The gospel of grace announces, *Forgiveness precedes repentance.* The sinner is accepted before he pleads for mercy. It is already granted. He need only receive it. Total amnesty. Gratuitous pardon. (188)

I read a prayer composed by the late Gen. Douglas MacArthur:

Youth is not a period of time. It is a state of mind, a result of the will, a quality of the imagination, a victory of courage over timidity, of the taste for adventure over the love of comfort. A man doesn't grow old because he has lived a certain number of years. A man grows old when he deserts his ideal. The years may wrinkle his skin, but deserting his ideal wrinkles his soul. Preoccupations, fears, doubts and despair are the enemies which slowly bow us toward earth and turn us into dust before death. You will remain young as long as you are open to what is beautiful, good, and great; receptive to the messages of other men and women, of nature, and of God. If one day you should become bitter, pessimistic, and gnawed by despair, may God have mercy on your old man's soul. (193)

The love of Christ is beyond all knowledge, beyond anything we can intellectualize or imagine. It is not a mild benevolence but a consuming fire. Jesus is so unbearably forgiving, so infinitely patient, and so unendingly

loving that He provides us with the resources we need to live lives of gracious response. (209)

The confessing church of American ragamuffins needs to join Magdalene and Peter in witnessing that Christianity is not primarily a moral code but a grace-laden mystery; it is not essentially a philosophy of love but a love affair; it is not keeping rules with clenched fists but receiving a gift with open hands. (211)

Long prayers and big words do not suit ragamuffins. Their mouthpiece is the tax collector in the temple: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). The ragamuffin knows that she is the tax collector and that refusing to admit it would make her a Pharisee. (215)

Perhaps the supreme achievement of the Holy Spirit in the life of ragamuffins is the miraculous movement from self-rejection to self-acceptance. It is not based on therapy or the power of positive thinking; it is anchored in their personal experience of the acceptance of Jesus Christ. (218)

Swimming in the merciful love of the redeeming Christ, we are free to laugh at the tendency to assume spiritual superiority—in ourselves. We are free to extend to others the mercy we have received. (221)