

Yard-Sale Grace

Matt Litton Friday, 28 March 2008 09:16

Once there was a red plaid couch purchased and brought home to be the centerpiece in the living room for a family of five. The couch was the central gathering place for the entire family through television shows, conversations and sporting events. The family loved the couch and the couch was happy. After several years the couch became stained and worn and the family moved the couch out of the living room and into the office. But the family still rested on the couch and the couch was happy.

Tragedies struck and the family did not need an office, sold the house, and no longer needed as much furniture so the youngest daughter took the couch to her apartment where it became more depleted and took on more stains; she covered the damage with an ornate cover and it was once again the centerpiece of life—a place for friendships to grow—and the couch was happy.

The couch was then handed on to the oldest son who had three children. The tattered old couch, too shabby to be the centerpiece of a living room, was placed in the play room where little boys jumped and climbed and ate popcorn on its sturdy frame, and the couch was happy.

Finally the day came when the couch was moved to the driveway of the son's house with a tag that read "Free to a Good Home" and many families stopped and looked, and many children sat on the couch, but no one seemed all that interested...

My mother always said, "You don't have yard sales to make money, you have yard sales so that other people will come and haul away your junk for you." And it was with that advice that my wife and I placed the sentimental old couch on the driveway with a sign, hoping that some family would come (with a truck) and haul it away for us. Although the outside was a little worn and stained, the frame was still very strong, a slipcover and the couch still had miles to go. Maybe it was because the couch had been in my family for twenty years and reminded me of my father and my little sister who had since passed away, but we decided it was best to give the couch away for free – we really wanted to see it adopted to a good home. It might sound silly, but we learned a little bit about grace through that yard sale experience.

We are raised, trained, conditioned and culturally indoctrinated to be consumers. Our faith community has been talking about the ill-effects of consumerism on our lifestyle recently, but my wife and I stumbled across something very true about human nature in 21-century America at the yard sale that morning. Consumers walked by our free couch all morning. They sat on it, commented on how sturdy and comfortable it was, allowed their kids to climb and play on it, but person by person would end their examination of the couch with a suspicious look. Finally after observing hours of this behavior around the couch, an older gentleman approached my wife stroking his salt and pepper beard and peering over out-dated glasses, voicing the suspicion that had gone undocumented all morning, "That couch over there, it looks nice, but what is wrong with it, why is it free?" My wife sincerely tried to convince the man that the couch was structurally fine—but he wasn't buying it. After the gentleman's departure there was a brief lull in the action where my wife decided to remove the "Free to a Good Home" sign and replace it with one that read "\$10 non-negotiable." Within twenty minutes, two families offered to buy the couch, and we awarded it to the family who could come and pick it up.

We are conditioned that we must pay for anything of value. It is true that the problem many people have with our faith, the problem many church people have with God, is that His grace is freely extended. We are consumers; we want to pay for it; we are suspicious, skeptical and distrustful of anything too good that is free. Look around and you will find most of the people you know are out there working overtime to earn love, to warrant acceptance, to deserve their place in eternity. The scandalous quintessence of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it's free, that the price for our salvation has already been paid. This has been a huge revelation in my spiritual journey as I have begun to examine how the depth with which I constantly want to earn my salvation and forgiveness has affected my spiritual growth. For so many of us, faith is an act of working to fill our spiritual bank account with good deeds or positive karma. We live life with the attitude of every good consumer—we believe we get what we pay for, we get what we deserve—yet nothing could be further from the truth.

God is a lot like that old red couch, calling us to sit, rest, experience an eternal quality of life, community, togetherness and peace. Like that couch for many of us (including me) the hardest thing to accept is God's Grace comes free—we only need to claim it.

And so the red-plaid couch set out on another journey with another family and was once again the centerpiece of life and community in the living room of another house. And the couch was happy...