

# **The Ragamuffin Gospel**

by Brennan Manning

## **Introduction**

**Group Prayer** (Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*):

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead. I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.

## **Verse and Response**

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." (Matthew 7:7-8)

As you participate in this small group, what is one thing you hope God will do in your life?

*Suggestions for maximizing this small group experience:*

- Be open: Make room for God to do something new in your life.
- Be transparent: As you openly share your hopes, fears, successes and failures, God will use your life experiences to build faith and courage in the lives of others.

- Be available: to God and to each other. Get to know other members of the group. Keep your eyes open for opportunities to encourage and pray for one another.
- Create a safe environment: where people can be heard and feel loved (no quick answers, snap judgments or simple fixes) and keeping what is discussed confidential among group members.
- Be Committed: Take this opportunity and commit yourself to make your group life a priority by attending meetings and keeping up with weekly readings of The Ragamuffin Gospel. Bring your book and Bible each week.
- Invite and welcome newcomers: Who isn't here that we'd like to invite?
- Keep your focus on God and your faith: Resist the temptation to make this a critical and intellectual theological enterprise; listen for what God is doing and wants to do in your life.
- Keep your Bible handy: Relate our discussions to the narrative and principles of the Bible and to your own life.
- Consider becoming a small group leader and trying your hand at facilitation.

### **Proposed Outline of Small Group Meetings**

September 30	A Word Before and Chapter 1 (pages 13-32)
October 7	Chapters 2, 3 and 4 (pages 33-88)
October 14	Chapters 5 and 6 (pages 89-125)
October 21	Chapters 7, 8 and 9 (pages 126-177)
October 28	Chapters 10 and 11 (pages 178-207)

Page references are to the 2005 edition.

## **Week 1: What Has Gone Wrong with Grace?**

**Read *A Word Before*** (pages 13-14)

What is attractive about this introduction?

What is troubling about this introduction?

### ***Chapter 1: Something is Radically Wrong***

What story or comment especially struck you in this chapter?

Matthew 9:9-13: As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

1. What is so radically unique and special about this story?

- a. What is the "furious love of God"?
- b. Who does Jesus invite to dinner?

Ephesians 2:8-9: For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

2. Brennan quotes Dostoevsky's description of grace (page 19).

- a. What is troubling about this description?
- b. Do you feel that God loves you even when you sin? Have you experienced God's love at a time when you were aware of your imperfection?
- c. Do you feel that God loves you unconditionally?

3. What is the significance of "sooner or later we are confronted with the painful truth of our inadequacy and insufficiency" (page 17)?

- a. Can we achieve grace?
- b. How is our emphasis on "what I do rather than what God is doing"?
- c. How can we "experience the goodness of God" (page 25)?

4. On the bottom of page 26, Brennan supposes that Luke (in Luke 18) purposely juxtaposes the story of the rich young ruler and Jesus' admonition to "let the little children come to me." It seems like there are two attitudes we can have in approaching God that are highlighted in this chapter. Compare and contrast those attitudes.
5. On pages 29-30, Brennan quotes Hans Kung (referring to the church);

*"It deserves neither God's mercy nor men's trust. The church must constantly be aware that its faith is weak, its knowledge dim, its profession of faith halting, that there is not a single sin of failing which it has not in one way or another been guilty of. And though it is true that the church must always dissociate itself from sin, it can never have any excuse for keeping sinners at a distance. If the church remains self-righteously aloof from failures, irreligious and immoral people, it cannot enter justified into God's kingdom. But if it is constantly aware of its guilt and sin, it can live in joyous awareness of forgiveness. The promise has been given to it that anyone who humbles himself will be exalted."*

Do you think our church is guilty of spiritual pride? What are the consequences of this? How can we change it?

## **Prayers**

## **The Ragamuffin Gospel**

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### **Week 2: Are we ragamuffins?**

**Group Prayer** (Brennan Manning, *Mercy* 4, page 234):

O God, I seek you, but my heart is fickle. I believe; please help my unbelief.

When all I can do is want to want You, take my crumb of faith and break it like bread to feed thousands, beginning, by Your mercy, with me.

You reject no desperate, sinful, seeking child. You say only and always, Come!  
I come to You, God.

Pour out Your Spirit on me. Speak Your words of life to this child.

I pray in Jesus' name, amen.

### ***Chapter 2: Magnificent Monotony***

What story or comments especially struck you in this chapter?

Job 38:1-21: Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? – when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped'? "Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? It is changed like clay under the seal, and it is dyed like a garment. Light is withheld from the wicked, and their uplifted arm is broken. "Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this. "Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness, that you may take it to its territory and that you may discern the paths to its home? Surely you know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great!

1. Why is it important to think of the power of God with amazement?

2. Brennan discusses how dramatically our view of God can affect our lives. How has that been true in your life? What would you like to do to make your view of God truer?
  - a. What examples does Brennan give of placing limits on God (Jonah, Mrs. Turpin)?
  - b. What limits do you place on God?
3. How does the God you learned about in your formative years compare with the God incarnated in Jesus, who loves us as we are, not as we should be?
4. What passages of scripture have most shaped your understanding of God?
5. Describe the Jesus of your present journey. How is he different from the God you grew up with? How does Brennan describe Jesus?
6. Brennan says, “A loving God fosters a loving people” (page 41)
  - a. How could this happen?
  - b. Does an increased knowledge and acceptance of grace lead to spiritual laziness and moral laxity (page 49)?
7. In this context, what does monotonous mean?

### ***Chapter 3: The Ragamuffin Gospel***

What story or comments especially struck you in this chapter?

Share the story of the smokers on pages 68-71. How does this make you feel? When have you felt excluded? When do you feel separated from God’s love?

1. Who were some ragamuffins Jesus hung out with?
  - a. It seems a noteworthy portion of Jesus’ ministry occurred around the sharing of meals with some unsavory characters. Who were these characters?
  - b. What was the significance of sharing a meal with folks in ancient Palestine (page 59)?
2. Describe the blessing of being “like a little child” (pages 52-55).
3. Would you rather be referred to as a child or a ragamuffin? Which are you more like?
4. What is the blessing of being a ragamuffin (pages 60, 63)?
5. What is the significance of sharing a meal with Jesus (page 61)?

6. Read Matthew 5:1-3: "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'"

The felt knowledge of the tenderness of Jesus that lifts us, scarred and depressed after sin, to Himself is the very soul of ragamuffin spirituality. Offer an illustration from your personal life that qualifies you as a member of the ragamuffin fellowship.

#### **Chapter 4: Tilted Halos**

What story or comments especially struck you in this chapter?

Read 1 John 4:16-19: "So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us."

1. Fear is driven out by love. Have you made peace with your flawed existence? Are there ways to move from self-reflection to self-acceptance, rooted in the experience of Jesus Christ? Are there examples of this movement in your life?
2. Brennan writes on page 75, "the sequence of forgiveness and then repentance, rather than repentance and then forgiveness, is crucial for understanding grace." Why? What does this say about God's love? What happens if we reverse them?
3. How is each of these attitudes needed in a relationship with God in order to truly live by grace?

Trust (pages 76-78)

Poverty of spirit/gratitude (pages 78-85)

Honesty (pages 85-87)

4. Were there things throughout your life that you thought could separate you from the love of God? Could they? What could? (Jesus speaks of only one unpardonable sin in Matthew 12:31-32.)

#### **Prayers**

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### **Week 3: Wonders and Grace**

**Prayer** (Rabbi Joshua Abraham Heschel):

Dear Lord,  
grant me the grace of wonder.  
Surprise me, amaze me,  
awe me in every crevice of Your universe.  
Delight me to see how Your Christ plays in ten thousand places  
to the Father through the features of men's faces.  
Each day enrapture me with Your marvelous things without number.  
I do not ask to see the reason for it all;  
I ask only to share the wonder of it all.  
Amen.

### **Psalm 104**

- 1 Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty,
- 2 wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
- 3 you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind,
- 4 you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.
- 5 You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken.
- 6 You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.
- 7 At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
- 8 They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them.
- 9 You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.
- 10 You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills,
- 11 giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst.
- 12 By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.



13 From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

14 You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth,

15 and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.

16 The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.

17 In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees.

18 The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney.

19 You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting.

20 You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.

21 The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.

22 When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens.

23 People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening.

24 O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

25 Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great.

26 There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

27 These all look to you to give them their food in due season;

28 when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

29 When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.

30 When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.

31 May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works--

32 who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.

33 I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

34 May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD.

35 Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD!

### **Chapter 5: Cormorants and Kittiwakes**

What story or comments especially struck you in this chapter?

1. Frederick Buechner wrote: "It is not objective proof of God's existence that we want but the experience of God's presence." (page 95) What difference does this make? Is that "the miracle we really get"?
2. How does the "grace of God operate in the life of a loving person" in the story about Fiorello LaGuardia? (pages 93-94)
3. Describe a moment when you have experienced grace unexpectedly in a person, place or moment. Think of a moment when you experienced silent wonder, radical amazement, or affectionate awe at the infinite goodness and greatness of God.
4. Do you have a favorite movie, book, novel, film or music where you feel grace abounds? Why?
5. How do we miss encounters with God? How could we be more aware?
6. Brennan sketches a biblical theology of "divine agape" from pages 100-103.
  - a. How does the understanding of God change?
  - b. Is this a sound understanding?
7. Who are the opponents of grace (page 104)? Why?
8. What is the Ragamuffin gospel (page 104-5)?

### **Chapter 6: Grazie, Signore**

What story or comments especially struck you in this chapter?

1. Who is this husband who is contorting his mouth and twisting his lips for an intimate kiss with his palsied wife? How is this an image of our relationship with God?
2. What does Jesus offer? And how are we to respond? What is the crisis? (pages 109-113)

3. Brennan Manning has said, "The decisive and daily conversion from mistrust to trust undergirds the entire spiritual life."
  - a. Why is trust difficult? (pages 115-118)
  - b. What do we realize when we trust? (119-121)
  - c. How does The Gift of the Magi or Mark 14:3-9 (page 122) fit in?
  - d. Recall a moment when, with complete abandon, you gave up control and yielded to the loving guidance of God.
4. How does trusting God lead to serving others and to evangelism? (pages 123-4)
5. How does the song of Salieri respond to grace? (page 125)
6. Of all God's countless gifts, for which are you most grateful?

### **Prayers**

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### **Week 4: Rigorous Honesty**

**Prayer** (Brennan Manning, page 253):

Lord Jesus, Savior, Servant,  
Help me to dream again.  
Rekindle in my heart that fire of the disciple who  
sees his calling everywhere,  
hears Your invitation everywhere,  
reaches out to Your children in great need everywhere.  
I really do want to live Your life in mine –  
to serve, to care, to give, to sing Your song  
– for Your glory and pleasure.  
Amen

### ***Chapter 7: Paste Jewelry and Sawdust Hot Dogs***

What story or comments especially struck you in this chapter?

1. Following the story of Max, Brennan says, “The philosophy of tough love is based on the conviction that no effective recovery can be initiated until a man admits that he is powerless over alcohol and that his life has become unmanageable. The alternative to confronting the truth is always some form of self-destruction.” (page 133-4)
  - a. When does spiritual transformation begin?
  - b. Is it necessary to sink this low to begin “the quest for honesty and a transparent personality”?
2. Why do ragamuffins need to accept that they are sinners? What does this lead to?
3. James 5:15-16 says, “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”
  - a. Why is confession so hard? What fears keep you from being as honest with others as you would like to be?
  - b. Do you have a friend or prayer group with whom you can be candid about your brokenness without fear?
4. What happens if we try to “dazzle God with our accomplishments”?

5. What happens if we “surrender control of our souls to rules”? (pages 140-3)
6. Do you feel your priorities, the way you spend your time and money, are aligned with the gospel?

### **Chapter 8: Freedom from Fear**

What story or comments especially struck you in this chapter?

John 8:31-32: Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

II Corinthians 3:17: Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Galatians 5:1: For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

1. Brennan refers to Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor story and says, "Sad but true: Some Christians want to be slaves." (page 146) Why would people give up their freedom?
2. What is Christian freedom? How does fear keep us from freedom?
3. Imagine this exercise: Read John 11:43-44 and replace Lazarus' name with your own: "When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "[Lazarus], come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." As you are unbound, imagine that Jesus is freeing you; and in a nonjudgmental, dispassionate way, read what is written on each linen strip that Jesus is freeing you from.
4. What does freedom in the Spirit look like (independence, prayer, compassion)? (pages 152-8)
5. When do you choose gentleness and when "tough love"?
6. Why does Jesus kiss the Grand Inquisitor?

### **Chapter 9: The Second Call**

What story or comments especially struck you in this chapter?

1. Have you experienced a "second call"? What was it like? Why is it hard to respond? Why do "most of us stand outside the banquet door"?
2. Matthew 11:28-30 says: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I

am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

- a. Brennan says, "Faith means you want God and want to want nothing else."  
Are there times when you truly desire to know more about God and experience the fullness of his love?
  - b. Is it possible for the Holy Spirit to fire your heart with intense desire?
3. Why is commitment needed? (pages 170-1)
  4. What do the stories of the prodigal son and the woman caught in adultery say about how God treats us and how God expects us to act with others?

## **Prayers**

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**Week 5: Sublime Madness**

**Prayer** (Brennan Manning, page 258)

Oh God, my Father, thank You for Your mercies –  
innumerable, measureless, fathomless . . . Thank You!  
Be present with me now on each step of this ragamuffin  
journey. Grow me up in my inner being to receive and  
share abroad more and more of Your love. Let me be Your  
hands and face and words to all I meet. Set me free to  
serve You – free from anxiety, fear, self-pity, self-hatred,  
cynicism, or skepticism. Free me from every crippling sin  
and any darkness of unbelief. Lord Jesus Christ, anoint  
my life and my spiritual community with deep faith  
and reckless abandonment to Your enduring goodness.  
Give us truly listening hearts, that we may hear Your Word  
and courageously act upon it, to the praise of Your name  
and joy of Your heart. I ask this in the name of your Son,  
our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Chapter 10: The Victorious Limp**

What story or comments especially struck you in this chapter?

1. What is the victorious life? How is it different from many descriptions of it? How is falling down and getting up again a happy ending?
2. How is Peter a ragamuffin?
3. Luke 15:20 says: “So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”
  - a. How does this verse show forth the theology that forgiveness precedes repentance and that repentance implies no change in a loving God, but only a change in your sinful self?
  - b. When have you experienced the faithfulness of God, especially in times of trouble and heartache?
4. What does Brennan mean by:
  - a. The courage to risk everything on Jesus

- b. The willingness to keep growing
- c. The readiness to risk failure

### ***Chapter 11: A Touch of Folly***

What story or comments especially struck you in this chapter?

Jesus said (John 15:9-17): “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Paul wrote: “What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

1. Why is this folly?
2. How can we avoid consciously or unconsciously placing limitations on God's love for us?
3. How can we allow our loving, compassionate savior to come to us on His own terms?
4. Do you believe that: “In the final analysis, discipleship is a life of sublime madness”? Why or why not?

### **The Scandal of Grace**

What does Brennan think is the scandal of grace?



What is the promise of the ragamuffin gospel? Consider pages 215-221.

Are you a ragamuffin?

**Prayers**