

Grace Over Law

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Luke 7:36-8:3; Galatians 2:15-21

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Galatians 2:15-21 (The Message)

¹⁵⁻¹⁶We Jews know that we have no advantage of birth over "non-Jewish sinners." We know very well that we are not set right with God by rule-keeping but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know? We tried it—and we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen! Convinced that no human being can please God by self-improvement, we believed in Jesus as the Messiah so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah, not by trying to be good.

¹⁷⁻¹⁸Have some of you noticed that we are not yet perfect? (No great surprise, right?) And are you ready to make the accusation that since people like me, who go through Christ in order to get things right with God, aren't perfectly virtuous, Christ must therefore be an accessory to sin? The accusation is frivolous. If I was "trying to be good," I would be rebuilding the same old barn that I tore down. I would be acting as a charlatan.

¹⁹⁻²¹What actually took place is this: I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man. Christ's life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that.

Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily.

Sermon

The **grace** of God. We use that word grace almost every Sunday in worship. Have you noticed that? But have you ever wondered just what it really means?

In our English language we use the word **grace** in different ways:

- We have a "*grace period*" – a few days after a bill is due before we are charged an overdue fee or the phone is turned off.

- Grace is a word that means one is not clumsy, but light and easy on the feet and with gestures – as in graceful.
 - Sometimes the word grace is used as a tongue-in-cheek for the opposite: as in one who trips and takes down several objects as they fall – “well, grace, that was a good one!”
- *Grace* before meals is a prayer of thanks, or a blessing of the food.
- *Grace* is a beautiful name for a woman in my mind. My grandmother was named Grace and while I never thought, as a girl, that I wanted to be named after her, I sure have wished it as an adult.
- Another definition of Grace, as a verb, is to *adorn* or to *decorate* – “we are *graced* with beautiful stained glass windows.”

But what does the word *Grace* mean when we talk about God?

We say that the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion are “outward, visible signs of an inward, invisible grace.” The things we see and hear, smell and taste are outward signs of something going on inside of us that we cannot see.

We also talk about the “*Means of Grace*.” Again, Baptism and Holy Communion are channels in which we receive *God’s grace*.

Marriage is also a “*means of grace*” if we allow it be. In fact, I think marriage is a good example of a place where we receive grace.

As a pastor who does some counseling with couples – mostly BEFORE they are married – but sometimes after – I have seen many times that couples extend grace to one another.

I am certain that even the newest married couple has experienced some disappointment or some conflict within their relationship. And while arguing and trying to prove who is right and who is wrong might settle the facts – it doesn’t really bring a couple close together in that deep loving place we like to be.

On the other hand, forgiving, letting go because you want to, deciding what is important is not who is right or who is wrong, but being in right relationship – that is grace.

Don’t misunderstand. There are times when we really need to talk things through, to discover truth before we can extend grace. Especially in those serious, very hurtful moments. But in so many of our daily moments, we can give grace instead of going round and round.

Jesus showed grace to people all the time. In our passage in Luke, his receiving the perfumed bath the woman was giving him – out of deep thanks for forgiveness she had received earlier – is a sign of grace. Jesus knew about her past – a prostitute – a sinner whom most upright citizens wanted nothing to do with, yet he forgave her, he showed her mercy and kindness and he spoke up for her when his host was being critical. *That was grace.*

Another time, Jesus came upon a group of people who were about to kill a woman for adultery. It was the law that someone should be stoned to death for that great sin. Yet, Jesus said to the group “who among you have never sinned? Let that one throw the first stone.” They all dropped their stones and walked away, and Jesus told the woman she was forgiven. To go and sin no more.

The law said put her death. Jesus, instead, showed mercy and love. The woman had an undeserved second chance. *That was grace!*

When Mary, the mother of Jesus, told Joseph she was carrying a baby, Joseph had every right to have her stoned to death. It was the law, you see. Yet, even before the angel came to tell Joseph that the child Mary was going to have was truly the Son of God, Joseph decided to quietly let it go and not have Mary killed. *That was grace.*

Grace is unmerited love, it is exercising forgiveness, it is showing mercy when punishment could be justified. Grace is what we read in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians – in what is known as the “love chapter.”

Paul says love is: “patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Can you see that love is grace and grace is love? It is a giving of self for another – not because they have earned it, but because we love. It is a mature, steadfast, unending, forgiving, second and third and 100th chance new beginning. It is offering life over death; pardon over punishment, reconciliation over separation.

Grace is an intimate relationship that gives constant new life.

Paul says in his letter to the Galatians in chapter 2 that to go back to following the laws – that is trying to be good enough, trying to somehow be holy enough or righteous enough, being so set on rules that we suck the joy out any relationship – to go back to that in place of grace is to say that Jesus went to the cross for nothing. If our salvation depends on our works – if our forgiveness depends on how good we are – then why did Jesus die?

Paul says in so many places in so many letters that he writes to the early churches that it is grace that justifies us.

In other words, there really isn't a thing we can do to earn our salvation. It may be difficult for some of us to really believe, but we are all equal in the eyes of God - when it comes to sin. But that is just as true when it comes to God's love and grace and mercy. Paul says in Romans that "while we were still sinners Christ died for us."

Not after we followed 150 rules and spent a year fasting or in prayer – not after we finally were able to follow the law to a tee (which we could never do!) but WHILE WE WERE SINNERS Christ Jesus died.

God saw us in our need, and while sin deserves death in God's eyes of justice, sinners needed grace in God's eyes of love. Undeserving as we might be – God sent his only Son to give himself so that we might have life! That's grace!

Paul talks a great deal about being "in Christ." He says that it is Christ who lives in him. It is an intimate relationship with the one who loves us so much that he is with us always, by the power of the Holy Spirit – guiding, loving, blessing, and making us know we belong to the family of God. That's grace!

I could end this sermon right here and it might be enough. Certainly is a good news word for us – this grace that grafts us into the body of Christ, gives us a place in the family of God, that promises life eternal with the Father, that nurtures and gives us great joy in life's journey.

But what about the response to this grace we have been given? While grace is freely given to us out of love and God's eternal kindness – and while we are not saved by our works (by how good we are or how well we live by the rules) ...

Don't we respond to this amazing grace by showing grace ourselves? By truly living a life that loves the way God loves? That looks at others in the way God looks at us? With equality, not judgment? With a readiness and willingness to forgive and to have real relationships with those whom Jesus calls our neighbors?

Don't we, as the church whom Jesus called into being, have an eager response to learn more, to genuinely worship this God of grace and glory, and to love Him with all our hearts, souls and minds AND to love – really love with a heart of grace – unmerited love – all people regardless of their beliefs, their status, their situation, their color or their race?

May our response to this loving, unmerited grace be equal, be as passionate as the woman who pours expensive oil on Jesus' feet, who bathed his feet with tears of joy and gratitude and who wiped them gently and lovingly with her own hair.

How do we show Jesus that kind of love?

- Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.
- Love your neighbor as you love yourself.
- Forgive one another as I have forgiven you.

That's grace!

May the grace of Christ attend you, the love of God surround you, the Holy Spirit keep you, that you may live in faith, abound in hope, and grow in love, both now and forevermore. Amen.

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