

What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do # 5: Accept the Grace that Keeps on Giving

Sermon for Sunday, March 7, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: 1 Timothy 1:12-17

1) Grace: how sweet it is!

A fellow pastor wrote in a magazine article:

A pastor friend who is a bit weird had the habit of calling me on Monday mornings a few times a year. I would answer the phone, and the voice on the other end said, "Hello, Bob. This is God speaking. I want to give you a gift. Just for today, you don't have to be perfect." Then he hung up. That was it.

The first time it happened, I was stunned. I couldn't believe what had just happened. I just sat and stared at the wall. "It's true!" I thought. "It's OK if I fail. God still loves me. There will still be tomorrow." Those phone calls helped me through some tough times.

That is the grace of God in action. Very simply put, the word "grace" means that God accepts us and loves us just as we are. God offers us the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ, and the gift is free for the taking. We don't have to earn it.

Grace is a two-way street. We don't just receive it from God; we in turn give it to those around us. Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

"Grace" is very simple; but also a very deep word. Theologians use it when they try to understand God. I have the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* on my bookshelf; its entry on "grace" is five pages long.

I'm not a theologian. I'm a pastor. My main interest here is how we live grace, not how we analyze it. Here's an example.

Imagine that you've just committed a serious blunder. I don't mean you forgot to buy toothpaste when you went shopping, and you have to go all the way back into town to get some. I mean you really blew it with someone. You said something or did something that is going to hurt someone else, someone that you care about. When you realize what you've done, you feel like you want to run away and hide. You wish you could live the last 24

hours over again. You feel physically ill as you prepare to face the person you wronged.

Grace is that other person saying to you, "How could you do that?! That was the stupidest and meanest thing you've ever done! By the way, I still want you as a friend."

Charlie Shedd, a minister and author, told about having a fight with his wife, and the next morning finding this note on the kitchen counter:

Dear Charlie,
I hate you.
Love, Martha.

In a sense, the Bible is like a cookbook. It may look good on paper. But when we put it into practice, we get taste how really *good* it is!

2) Grace for everyone?

Some years ago in another church I preached about forgiveness. To illustrate that, I referred to Paul Bernardo who was in the news at that time. He's the fellow who repeatedly raped, tortured and murdered two teenage girls in the Hamilton area. In that sermon, I said God would forgive even Paul Bernardo, if Paul Bernardo repented of his sin and followed Jesus Christ. Many people said to me after that service, "I like the idea of grace, but grace for Paul Bernardo is going too far."

Philip Yancey wrote a book about this surprising love of God. His book is called *What's so Amazing About Grace?* In one chapter he responds to people who condemn the Paul Bernardos of our world to hell without any hope, beyond the reach of God:

There is a simple cure for people who doubt God's love and question God's grace: to turn to the Bible and examine the kind of people God loves... The Bible tells of a murderer and adulterer who gained a reputation as the greatest king of the Old Testament, a "man after God's own heart." And of a church being led by a disciple who cursed and swore that he never knew Jesus...

I get mailings from Amnesty International, and as I look at their photos of men and women who have been beaten and cattle-prodded and jabbed and spit on and electrocuted, I ask myself, "What kind of human being could do that to another human being?" Then I read the book of Acts and meet the kind of person who could do such a thing — Paul, now an apostle of grace, a servant of Jesus Christ, the greatest missionary history has ever known. If

God can love that kind of person, maybe, just maybe, he can love the likes of me.¹

Let's read Paul's own account of what Jesus Christ did for him:

1 Timothy 1:12-15, New Living Translation

How thankful I am to Christ Jesus our Lord for considering me trustworthy and appointing me to serve him, even though I used to scoff at the name of Christ. I hunted down his people, harming them in every way I could. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. Oh, how kind and gracious the Lord was! He filled me completely with faith and the love of Christ Jesus.

This is a true saying, and everyone should believe it: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — and I was the worst of them all.

When tragedies happen, we often ask, “Why, God? Why?” Paul in the Bible wondered why something so wonderful had happened to him. This passage continues on with the only answer that made sense to Paul: God used him to make the point that no one, *absolutely no one*, is beyond the grace of God.

1 Timothy 1:16, New Living Translation

But that is why God had mercy on me, so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.

Go on to verse 17 (not in the sermon outline)

Glory and honour to God forever and ever. He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen.

3) “Ungrace” destroys

We hear a lot of doom and gloom about the mess our world is in. Sometimes in sermons I paint a picture of people who have made a mess with their lives. Often we can see ourselves in the picture, and we may feel guilty about our own mistakes. For some people, that's unnecessary; they already feel rotten enough for what they've done.

Paul Tournier is a Christian psychiatrist who has written widely about how faith and mental health are connected. He writes in his book *Guilt and Grace*, “I cannot study this very serious problem of guilt without raising the very obvious and tragic fact that religion — my own as

well as that of all believers — can crush instead of liberate.”

Tournier tells of patients who come to him: a man harbouring guilt over an old sin; a woman who cannot put out of her mind an abortion that took place ten years before. What the patients truly seek, says Tournier, is grace. Yet in some churches they encounter shame, the threat of punishment, and a sense of judgement. In short, when they look in the church for grace, they often find ungrace.¹

Philip Yancey in his book on grace tells about a woman who was going through a divorce. She was standing in the entrance of her church with her 15-year old daughter when the pastor's wife approached. “I hear you are divorcing. What I can't understand is that if you love Jesus and your husband loves Jesus, why are you doing that?” The pastor's wife had never really spoken to my friend before, and her harsh rebuke in the daughter's presence stunned my friend. “The pain of it was that my husband and I both did love Jesus, but the marriage was broken beyond mending. If she had just put her arms around me and said, ‘I'm so sorry...’ ”

That's all the more reason that we need to hear the good news as well. We need to be repeatedly reminded about God's incredible grace and forgiveness.

4) Grace heals and builds

Yancey tells another story about another divorced woman, Rebecca, who was part of his Bible study group at the church he attends.

Rebecca is a quiet woman, and in weeks of meeting together she had rarely opened her mouth. When someone mentioned divorce, however, she proceeded to tell her own story. She had married a pastor who had some renown as a retreat leader. It became apparent, however, that her husband had a dark side. He dabbled in pornography, and on his trips to other cities he solicited prostitutes. Sometime he asked Rebecca for forgiveness, sometimes he did not. In time, he left her for another woman, Julianne.

Rebecca told us how painful it was for her, a pastor's wife, to suffer this humiliation. Some church members who had respected her husband treated her as if his sexual straying had been her fault. Devastated, she found herself pulling away from human contact, unable to trust another person. She could never put her husband out of mind because they had children and she had to make regular contact with him in order to arrange his visitation privileges.

¹ Philip Yancey, *What's so Amazing About Grace*, p. 62.

¹ Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 23.

Rebecca had the increasing sense that unless she forgave her former husband, a hard lump of revenge would be passed on to their children. For months she prayed. At first her prayers seemed as vengeful as some of the Psalms: she asked God to give her ex-husband “what he deserved.” Finally she came to the place of letting God, not herself, determine “what he deserved.”

One night Rebecca called her ex-husband and said, in a shaky, strained voice, “I want you to know that I forgive you for what you’ve done to me. And I forgive Julianne too.” He laughed off her apology, unwilling to admit he had done anything wrong. Despite his rebuff, that conversation helped Rebecca get past her bitter feelings.

A few years later Rebecca got a hysterical phone call from Julianne, the woman who had “stolen” her husband. She had been attending a ministerial conference with him back in their home town where they had met, and he had left the hotel room to go for a walk. A few hours passed, then Julianne heard from the police: her husband had been picked up for soliciting a prostitute.

On the phone with Rebecca, Julianne was sobbing, “I never believed you,” she said. “I kept telling myself that even if what you said was true, he had changed. And now this. I feel so ashamed, and hurt, and guilty. I have no one on earth who can understand. Then I remembered the night when you said you forgave us. I thought maybe you could understand what I’m going through. It’s a terrible thing to ask, I know, but could I come talk to you?”

Somehow Rebecca found the courage to invite Julianne over that same evening. They sat in her living room, cried together, shared stories of betrayal, and in the end prayed together. Julianne now points to that evening as the time when she became a Christian.

“For a long time, I had felt foolish about forgiving my husband,” Rebecca told us. “But that night I realized the fruit of forgiveness. Julianne was right. I could understand what she was going through. And because I had been there too, I could be on her side, instead of her enemy. We both had been betrayed by the same man. Now it was up to me to teach her how to overcome the hatred and revenge and guilt she was feeling.”¹

5) Grace can bring healing to your life

In a moment, we will have the opportunity to pray. In this prayer, we can ask God to heal us: heal our minds, our emotions, our relationships, even our bodies (so much illness is caused by bitterness and fear).

This prayer will focus on two things:

- a) That God will pour his grace into our lives, the same as with the apostle Paul. That we will be filled with faith and the love of Jesus Christ. That we will turn away from our sins, and receive this overflowing of love.
- b) That we will pass on this grace to others. Even to anyone against whom we hold a grudge. *Especially to anyone against whom we hold a grudge.*

If you have never prayed like this before, you may be surprised at the power of God. You may feel like shouting, or perhaps like crying. I want to tell you right now — you, and the people around you — that’s OK. Just allow God to come in and work.

Prayer

Dear God,

I’m so thankful that you love me, just the way I am. I’ve made mistakes, I’ve hurt people, and others have hurt me too. I’m so thankful that I can count on your love.

I thank you for sending us Jesus Christ. I thank you that he gave his life for me. I thank you that he lives again, and that he is here with us right now. I turn away now from the sin in my life, and I turn to Jesus. I ask him to come into my life and fill me.

Thank-you, Lord, that you forgive my sins. It feels so good to be free of that burden. But I still carry the weight from the things others have done to me. It’s heavy, carrying all that bitterness around. It’s poisonous too, for I can get so mad I can feel it in my body. Jesus, I give all those hurts to you, for you to look after. I want to be free to start over again.

Thank-you, Lord. Thank-you. Amen.

Theme for today: The Bible tells who is eligible to come to worship:

Psalm 24:3-4, New Living Translation:

Who may climb the mountain of the Lord?

Who may stand in his holy place?

Only those whose hands and hearts are pure,
who do not worship idols and never tell lies.

I guess we can all go home: none of us fit that description.

But here is good news!

Philippians 3:9, New Living Translation:

I no longer count on my own goodness or my ability to obey God's law, but I trust Christ to save me. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith.

¹ Philip Yancey, *What’s so Amazing About Grace*, p. 95-96.