

“Christmas with Grace—Something’s Missing”

This past Summer, Janet had a continuing education event in Dallas for four days, so for four days it was just me and the kids. We had a blast. One afternoon Zoe announced that she wanted to bake cookies and do it all by herself. I asked her if she had ever done that before, she said she’d helped mom before, and that was good enough for me. A nine year old, an electric mixer, an oven. What could go wrong?

She was in the kitchen mixing things up and I was in the garage working and I’d walk through occasionally to check on her and she’d reassure me that she was fine. She dumped all the ingredients into a big bowl and mixed it all up.

She wanted to do a small cookie-cake for Mom so we got a pan for that and put some cookie dough in it. But when I put the cookie cake in the oven things didn’t look right. I just thought maybe it was the pan, or the recipe wasn’t for that big a cookie, or something. I took it out and thought it maybe just needed to cool.

Then we tried to bake the cookies. Something was definitely wrong. So I went over the ingredients with Zoe and figured out that she put in a fraction of the flour in the recipe. They were mostly sugar and butter, which makes cookies become “melties” in the oven. They just tend to liquefy. Things tend to go wrong when there’s an ingredient missing in the dough.

And things tend to go wrong in our relationships when there’s a missing ingredient in our lives. I mean, have you ever known anybody who was always sour, always looked for the worst in people, always found some way to bring people down, never willing to forgive? Just kind of a cranky, Grinch of a person? Raise your hand if you’re sitting next to somebody like that right now...I’m kidding.

But that person, you look at them and how they treat others who have disappointed them and you want to say, “I know you have a valid case against people who hurt you, or disappointed you. I know you’ve got a story about those people you’ve written off because they’ve hurt you. But why not just lighten up? Just cut people some slack. Let it go. Move on.” But they don’t and they continue to be miserable and make others miserable too. Why? There’s an ingredient that didn’t get put into to their thinking about relationships.

When this particular ingredient is missing we tend to hold a grudge when somebody has hurt us. You look at that from the outside and say, “Can’t you just move on?” Not when this ingredient is missing. When this ingredient is missing, those are fightin’ words. “Don’t you tell me to move on!”

When this ingredient is missing, kids don’t get along with parents and parents resent their kids. As an outsider you want to say, “Can’t you just let it go?” Not when this ingredient is missing.

When this ingredient is missing marriages collapse under the weight of disappointment or unforgiveness. Ever hear a couple arguing in the next booth at a restaurant. You’re ignoring who you’re there with trying to listen in on their conversation. Come on, you know you’ve done it! They’re fighting. You’re getting neck spasm listening. You just want to pop your head over the divider and say, “Just relax. Take a deep breath. Move on. Let it go.” You hear what’s going on and clearly something’s missing.

Your kid’s marriage. Your daughter tells you all that her husband is doing or not doing and you try to be sympathetic, but in the end you want to say, “Forgive him and move on. You guys just need to work it out.” She says, “Oh no, it’s more complicated than that.”

When this ingredient is missing families feud over things they don’t even remember. Why, in our families, can we not just work it out and get along? I don’t know, but maybe this is the solution for our families: [VIDEO: Family Survival Kit-available at www.worshiphousemedia.com].

Actually that’s not the solution. Why does it have to be so hard all the time? I’ll tell you why: in all of these relationships, there’s something missing. It’s one ingredient that makes all the difference.

Now maybe you’d expect to find this missing ingredient in church. But it’s often missing in the church, just like it’s missing everywhere else. When this ingredient is missing from a church and you go through a divorce, or you have a kid go prodigal on you, or you have a moral failure, all you feel is judgment, and coldness, and being pushed aside.

When this ingredient is missing countries erupt in civil war and nation fights nation. The conflicts in the Middle East. I know this is naïve, but is there something in you at times, like there is in me, that wants to say

to the warring factions, and tribes and ethnic groups, “Won’t you just work it out? Would you just get along? Do you really think this chaos and violence is better than some form of compromise?” You know as an outsider looking it seems like they should be able to sit down and work that out. But there’s something missing.

Why does all this happen? There’s a missing ingredient. And when it goes missing, everything gets distorted. And when it’s missing everything gets complicated, and when it’s missing the world is a difficult place and what should be a no-brainer becomes extraordinarily complex. When this key ingredient is missing, little things become big things.

The next two weeks we’re going to talk about this, because Christmas is about God sending, in flesh and bone, the missing ingredient. Christmas is about God sending, in an unmistakable, extremely remarkable way, the missing ingredient. The missing ingredient, that when you look at it in its rawest form all by itself seems like a weakness.

But what we’re going to discover is that the missing ingredient is anything but weakness. It’s so powerful that it has the potential to take fathers and sons who are at odds and bring them together. Husbands and wives, mothers and daughters. It is so powerful it has the potential to heal broken relationships that have been that way for years and years. It has the potential to heal old wounds. It has the potential to bring down theological barriers between people. It has the potential to bring down racial divides. It has the power to heal a nation and nations. It is a most powerful force because nothing shapes the human soul and heart like this missing ingredient.

The message of Christmas is that God saw what we needed the most and he gave to us in his son Jesus Christ.

Now, I love it when I learn new things or see things in a new way. That’s happened to me in what I’m about to talk about. We’re going to look at a part of John chapter 1. This is the story of Jesus. Now Matthew and Luke start their stories talking about the birth of Jesus. The angel visits Mary, the journey to Bethlehem, the manger, the shepherds, the magi, Santa Claus (right!) all those parts. But John writes later and he writes differently about the birth of Jesus. He wants people to know more about why things happened, than what happened. He leaves the what to Matthew and Luke.

John’s trying to say, “None of us would ever have predicted any of this. When God sent his son into the world at Christmas, God was sending humanity the missing ingredient.”

John 1:14 says, “**And the Word [God] became flesh and lived among us...**” (John 1:14). We read that say, “And...” But John’s Jewish audience would have read that or heard and said, “Whoa, whoa, whoa! You’re kidding. Can’t be.” John’s like, “It’s true, I know it’s hard to believe. But it’s true.” It was hard for a Jewish audience to accept because they had a particular view of God they had embraced for centuries. God was the God of fire on the mountain—don’t approach the mountain! God was the God who was behind the thick Temple walls. And behind those Temple walls, was the Holy Place in the middle of the Temple, and inside the Holy Place was the Holy of Holies, and inside the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant. And that was where God was. God was unapproachable. And he was untouchable. If you touched the Ark you died. Only one person could go into the Holy of Holies once a year and they tied a rope on that guy’s ankle so that if he got in there and died, they could drag him out! In the view of John’s Jewish listeners, God was the touch-me-and-you-die God.

And John is telling these people, “God has shown up and he has lived among us in a body.” John’s saying, “I touched him, we hung out together, I was in his presence. God came and lived with us.” People listening had to be saying, “What would that be like? Holy 10 commandments God. Holy fire on the mountain God. Holy touch-me-and-you-die God now dwells with us. What was that like walking around with him?”

John answers in verse 14. “**...we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth**” (John 1:14). And there it is. Grace and truth. But those people listening to John would’ve said, “No, no, no. You mean justice and truth. You mean judgment and truth. You mean law and truth. You mean you better watch out, you better not cry and truth.”

John's like, "That's what took us all by surprise. God showed up in a body and he was nothing like we thought he would be. Because he was full of, he overflowed with, he exuded, grace. Every time we turned around it was grace and truth. And that took us completely by surprise."

It's like John knows that he's talking to people who just can't believe him, so he says it again. He writes, "**From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace**" (John 1:16). It's like John's saying, "I was there. The disciples and I were with him. And just when we thought he'd maxed out his grace, there was more coming from him. I'm telling you every time Jesus turned around it was grace, upon grace, upon grace. This is not what we were expecting from the touch-me-and-you-die God.

"In fact, you know how we all hated tax collectors. We were all on the same page about that. You know what Jesus did, he recruited one for our team—Matthew. And Zacchaeus the tax collector. We're walking down the street, next thing we know, Jesus is calling him down out of tree and we're having dinner with him at his house!

"One day, the crowd parts and they throw down a woman who was caught in the act of adultery. We all know the law and she's supposed to die right then and there, but Jesus makes some comment and the crowd disperses. He tells her not to do that anymore, and he tells her she's forgiven! Every time we turned around it was grace, upon grace, upon grace.

"One time he told us when you pray, don't just pray for the people you love. Pray for your enemies. Why would we pray for our enemies?! Because that's what grace does. And if somebody wants something from you, give them that and more. Why would you do that? Because that's what grace does. We were thinking judgment and truth. But every time we turned around it was just grace upon grace."

"Even at the end. He's up there dying on the cross and he looks down at the people who just drove spikes through his wrists and ankles and he said, 'Forgive them, they don't know what they're doing.' We just couldn't believe it. There it was again. Grace, upon grace, upon grace.

John's like, "This isn't the God you thought you knew. He was nothing like we expected." In the next verse John says it yet again: "**The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ**" (John 1:17). The Law everybody understood. The Law was cause and effect. If you do this, God will do this. The law said that if you obey God, God will bless you, if you disobey God, God will curse you. The law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Now, Jesus wasn't soft on sin. He didn't dumb-down the law. If you were in his presence you felt your sin so palpably. But you felt his grace all the more. He conveyed this sense that you will not be defined by your sin. He was, "You will be defined by my grace."

Look at what he did. He said the law says that here's the punishment you deserve because of your sin, because you've broken the law. But then he said, "I'm giving you exactly what you don't deserve." Grace—forgiveness, mercy. He's like, "It's true that you're unworthy, but I'm going to make you worthy. It's true you have no standing with God—I'm going to give you a standing with God. It's true that you owe more than you can pay; I'm going to pay what you owe." John's like, "As guilty as we knew we were, he gave us exactly what we didn't deserve."

Through Jesus we get exactly what we don't deserve—that's grace. At Christmas God sent us the missing ingredient. The missing ingredient between husbands and wives, the missing ingredient between employees, the missing ingredient in the Middle East, the missing ingredient where there are old wounds, the missing ingredient when we don't have the strength or ability to forgive. The missing ingredient is always the same. It's grace. The willingness to look at somebody and say, "I know what's happened, and I know what you've done, and I know how you've ripped me off, and I know how we both feel. But I'm not going to give you what you deserve. I'm going to do for you, what Jesus did for me. I'm going to give you exactly what you don't deserve."

At Christmas God gave us what we deserved the least and needed the most—grace. That little, seemingly weak, insignificant little thing that has the power to transform every single relationship beginning with our relationship with our Heavenly Father.

Over the years I feel like I've been very blessed, very lucky, some would say, because I've not really been hurt very often. Not very often and I'm glad, but I've been hurt deeply. I practice what I preach and I've worked through forgiving those people and I can honestly tell you that I am a forgiving person. But at the same time I have to say that there are vestiges of un-grace in me.

Years and years ago I was hurt so deeply by somebody in the church and I forgave them, but what I found later was that I was still not really extending grace to them. I was still finding ways to put distance between us, to find ways to exclude them, to keep them on the fringes. You'd probably join me in being ungraceful if you heard my sad story. "Because, because, because of all the terrible things he does!"

And what I've discovered is that at the source of my un-grace was simply fear. What would I be afraid of? I was afraid that if I really gave them exactly what they didn't deserve that I would be letting them get away with something. I was afraid that if I offered grace they'd get away with something. And I didn't want that to happen. But it was like God telling me, "Aaron, you have made yourself judge and you are not his judge."

There was un-grace in my life. And un-grace is anti-God. Un-grace is anti-Jesus. Un-grace is anti-spiritual maturity.

I talked to a man last week that's experiencing a deep misery, and resentment, and bitterness in his life because someone offended him and he is unwilling to extend them grace. And I believe that misery will just fester until he figures that out.

At Christmas, God came and dwelt among us, to be grace in a body and show me and you how to be like him and to be to other people exactly what they don't deserve. In that relationship when I stopped being so ungraceful, you know happened? God healed a relationship that I had sworn wasn't worth healing. And listen, it didn't start when they got their act together and deserved my grace. It began when I discovered my fear was fueling my un-grace.

At Christmas, God gave you precisely what you didn't deserve, but needed the most. And this Christmas my prayer for me and you is that some of us would find the key to give some people precisely what they don't deserve, but need the most. Grace. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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