

“Christmas with Grace—Here and Back Again!”

Last week as we started this series and talked about how something’s missing. Something that’s often missing in our relationships, something that’s missing in our culture, something that’s missing between nations and within nations. We said it’s that little word, **Grace—undeserved favor, unconditional acceptance.** Grace—giving someone exactly what they don’t deserve. And yes, there are bits and pieces of grace here and there, grace is in short supply. It’s in short supply partly because it’s difficult to receive it sometimes—after all, I don’t deserve that! But it’s even more difficult to extend it to others because after all you don’t deserve it! And if I become a graceful person I have to forgive and if I forgive that lets them off the hook. If I become a person of grace I have to move in their direction before they move in my direction and I might be taken advantage of. I just don’t know if I’m willing to take those risks.

Every time I hear a message on this, and every time I read something about this, every time I get convicted and think I’m going to become more graceful, there’s that voice that whispers, “Don’t forgive because if you forgive you’re letting them off easy! Don’t get hurt.” I hear that voice and I’m tempted to retreat into a place of ungrace, a place where I only give what’s been given, I carefully measure it out in the right amounts.

But every once in a while you see a display of grace that takes your breath away. You may have seen the story a couple years ago about Joe Moore. He was a hog farmer in a very small rural community in Texas. He was wrongly accused and convicted of dealing drugs. He was sent to prison and was there almost 4 years when it was finally discovered that the undercover investigator had lied and forged documents that sent Mr. Moore to prison. Joe was 56 when he was sent to prison. 60 when he got out. When the truth came out he was given a full pardon. Of course the damage was done. His livelihood was gone, his standing in the community destroyed, some of his family had written him off and walked away, he’s 60 and how do you start over from there?

He was interviewed on TV and the reporter asked him, “Joe, are you bitter?” You’ve just spent from 56 to 60 in jail for a crime you did not commit, are you bitter toward that man who put you behind bars. His response: “Bitter, no. I have no right to be bitter. I forgave him long ago. I’m thankful that the Lord was watching over me. It’s hard to know how I’m going to make a living. I’ve got nothing, but I’ll just leave it in the hands of the Lord.” And all God’s people said, “What the...?!” But there it is. There’s grace in action.

A little over three years ago, the world, the world was shocked when Charles Roberts, a milk truck driver, pulled up to a little Amish school in Nickel Mines, PA, went in with a small arsenal, sent out the boys and the teacher, had 10 little girls lie face down on the floor then open fired on them killing 5, and then killing himself. The world was shocked. That something so horrific could be carried out against simple, peace-loving, people was simply unthinkable. But what was even more unthinkable to the world was the forgiveness that poured out from the Amish families. Within days they had publicly stated their forgiveness of the killer and reached out to his widow and children. One Amish man went to the killer’s Father’s home and together they wept and held one another. Half the mourners at Charles Roberts’ funeral were Amish. The father of one of the slain girls said that as they released the killer, they had released themselves from anger and bitterness, but not from pain.

On the first anniversary of the killings, the families put out a public statement that said, “Forgiveness is a journey...you need help from your community of faith and from God, and sometimes even from counselors, to make and hold on to a decision to not become hostage to hostility...Hostility destroys community.”

Some in the media criticized the Amish grace that came so quickly, but what they failed to understand is that this grace, grace that took the form of forgiveness, was thickly woven into their lives already. This grace was in practice everyday before the tragedy hit. Grace like that shocks the world. It doesn’t look right, it doesn’t feel right but there’s something in me and probably in you that says, “Wow! How amazing!”

Why does that shock us? But why is grace so rare? Why is it so hard to live out? Why is it so absent from culture? Why is it so absent from my heart? That question leads us into the Bible. And today we’re going to look at what the Apostle Paul had to say about grace. He talks about how gracelessness came into the world through one man, and how grace returned through another. Paul is explaining where grace went,

and, like we talked about last week, how Christmas is a celebration of the reintroduction of grace. That at Christmas God brought grace back, put it back on the table and gave us opportunity to experience it no matter what's going on in our culture.

Paul starts this section by writing this: **"...sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people..." (Romans 5:12).** This is where Paul begins. He's saying, "If you want to know why there is so little grace, if you want to know why we struggle to live it out, it's because of sin." Paul says, "You want to know where grace went? It walked out the door when sin walked in."

Now it's very important for us to understand this next part. Paul's talking to a Jewish audience so he explains all this in terms they understood but are strange to us. Because they all knew where sin came from. They could tell you that it came from one man Adam. You remember the story of Adam and Eve. God creates all that is; God creates Adam and Eve and puts them in this amazing place where all their needs are taken care of. They get exactly what they don't deserve, they didn't earn any of it—it's just there free for the taking. They live in a world of grace. In a world of grace you don't really need rules. But there was one little rule in that place, the Garden of Eden: Don't eat from that one tree.

They eat, sin enters in and from that point on all of humanity is infected with sin. It's passed on from one generation to the next, and the next, and the next. Jews understood that. Whether you read that story of Adam and Eve literally or figuratively you can't get around the fact that we are infected with sin. We have this tendency toward rebellion, we have this pull toward self-centeredness and self-gratification, we have this draw toward taking rather than giving. And it crushes us. It messes up our lives.

The people Paul was talking to knew this. They knew about the infection of sin, they knew about grace walking out the door when sin walked in, they just had to look around and see life for what it was to see a graceless world. Everybody was doing unto others as they had done unto them. People thought they had to earn their way back to God. People thought, "I've got to perform my way back to God so he will one day say, 'Now, you're good enough.'"

Almost every world religion has bought into the notion that there is a good God in a good heaven waiting for people to be good enough to reach him. God's got his naughty and nice list and you better personally do what it takes to get on the nice list. That's what most of the world's religions teach.

That's how we treat each other for the most part. You had better treat me the way I deserve to be treated. You expect me to treat you the way you deserve. But the problem is that my estimation of what I deserve is different than your estimation. We live in a world of ungrace, of payback, of I'm going to give you what you deserve.

So Paul says, "Sin is in the world, it came into the world through one man and when sin came in, grace walked out." If you think that through a little bit, at some point you're going say, "Wait a second, that's not fair! I'm infected with sin; I have this human condition...but I didn't choose it! That's not fair!" Well, welcome to the real world, Neo! Life isn't fair! Parents, that's a lesson we all teach our kids, right? "But mom, dad, it's not fair that she gets to do that and I don't! It's not fair that they get that and I don't. It's not fair that they get to go there and I don't!" Hey, fairness walked out with grace! Where there is sin, there's no fairness. There's selfishness. There's greed. There's hoarding. There's stealing. There's self-addiction. But there is no fairness. It's not fair that we have the tendency toward sin, but it's reality. Life's not fair. Say that with me, "Life's not fair."

So keep following Paul's line of thought here. Fair or not, sin came through one man and death followed—the cost of sin is death. Paul said, "Death reigned." That means that death was king—physical death, spiritual death. Death is king. Death reigned. And that sounds like really bad news.

But then Paul teases us a little bit. He's like, "Yeah, we're all infected with sin and death reigned..." **"But the gift is not like the trespass" (5:15).** What gift? What gift is he talking about? We'll get to that in a second. Paul's laying out a one to one correlation. Watch this, Paul writes: **"For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" (5:15).**

Paul's like, "If death reigns because of one man, Adam, and his one act of sin that infected us all, then imagine what one act of the God-man can do! One act of the God-man could change everything, could undo what had been done. One act of the God-man could end the reign of death."

Paul goes on and says, "**judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification**" (5:16). Let's look at that word "justification" in there. It's the word of the day. It's a good word to know. One way of defining **Justification is standing with God just as if you never sinned**. Justification is standing before God and knowing that you have a relationship with God as if you had never broken one rule, one law. You stand there before God like you had never sinned.

Everybody who receives the gift (what's the gift? we'll get to that) receives justification. It's like you never sinned. You're like, "But...uh... I did sin. How can I stand before a holy God?" Well that's the gift. We'll get to that in minute. You're like, "I don't deserve to stand before God like I didn't sin because...I did." Right, but remember, this isn't fair, this isn't about deserve anymore. This is new. This is Grace. "But it's not fair because I'm busted!" Right, it's not fair. It's about grace. "But I wouldn't do that for anybody..." Right, but this isn't about you. This is about grace.

I don't get it. You don't get. They didn't get. So Paul says it again! "**For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!**" (5:17).

Did you catch that in there? There's the gift! Do you know what's in the box? The gift is righteousness. That's the free grace-gift—righteousness. **Righteousness is a right standing before God**. Righteousness is being able to say, "I am cool with God. I don't have to fake it. I don't have to pretend. I don't have to make a bunch of promises. I don't have to make a bunch of deals with God." It's a gift of a right standing with God.

But there are two big "R" words here. Receive the gift of Righteousness. Receive. Receiving is the key. And did you catch that other very important part in there. Once the gift is received grace is reintroduced into life.

But here's where we struggle. And it's different for everybody, but maybe because of the environment you were raised in, or the church experiences of your past this doesn't compute. Maybe you're thinking, "All my teachers graded me so I figure God's grading me too. Since I had to run fast and jump high to be on the track team, God's probably expecting me to run fast and jump high. And since I had to out-interview all the people who were interviewing for the job, I probably have to interview with God and out-interview everybody else."

"I mean, everybody's got a standard! God's got a standard. I've got to meet everybody else's standard I'm sure God has one too." But all that's a graceless way of thinking. You take that graceless way of thinking and try to lay it over Christianity and you come up with some weird hodge-podge of religion where you think you've got to impress God to point where he finally says, "You're OK."

It's hard for us to understand that God wants to give us, just give us, a right standing with us that has nothing to do with your personal righteousness. Your personal righteousness is completely irrelevant because you can't be that good. That's why it's a gift. God had to give it to you because you could never earn it on your own.

Check this out. Paul writes: "**Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all**" (5:18). Look closely at that passage. How many righteous acts did it take? One. One act. And whose act was it? Your act of righteousness? No! Was it my action? No. Your name is not in that scripture. It's not your action that makes you righteous, that gives you a right standing with the Holy God. It's the act of the one—the God-man. It doesn't say that through the obedience of Aaron, Aaron will be made righteous. It doesn't say through the obedience of Mark, Mark will be made righteous.

Your obedience has nothing to do with your right standing with God. You say, "It's got to!" No. That's gracelessness talking. That's ungrace. That's, "Earn my way to God. I'm not as bad as him. I've been to

church for a month! It's killing me but I've been four weeks in a row! I read my Bible! I'm moving in the right direction. Doesn't that count for something? Isn't God impressed by my obedience?" No. He's only been impressed by one act of obedience, from the one man, Jesus. And his one act of obedience got enough of your heavenly Father's attention for him to say, "For those who will receive the gift of a right standing with me through that one act of obedience, they're stand before as if they had never sinned." Whoa! Remember last week. Grace upon grace upon grace. One act set us up for a right standing with God if we will just receive it.

Now here's the thing. This Christmas you're going to give some of these, you're going to receive some of these. But in the graceless world that we live in, isn't it true that some of the gifts you'll give and some of the gifts you'll receive are kind of like this... (a gift with strings attached). Baby this is for you! I love you!

Sometimes it's overt and sometimes it's covert but in our graceless world we are so accustomed to strings being attached to everything that's given to us, we just assume that even though the Bible says it's a gift, even though it we call say it's a gift, even though we can sing the songs about how amazing it is, come on! At the end of the day there's no free lunch! It's a contract! If I, then you. And if I don't, you won't. It just can't be that simple!

But the message of Christmas is simply this. [taking strings off] The gift of righteous is a no-strings-attached gift. It is a grace gift offered to unrighteous people who could never do it on their own. And the only way they'd have a right standing with God is for God to **give it** to them.

I had no choice but to be born a sinner. But I do have a choice about receiving the gift. God will not force this gift on me or you. I have the choice. You have the choice to receive it and when you do, you are given a right standing with your heavenly Father.

You say, "I don't deserve it." So what. That's why it's grace. "Well I guess I do deserve it more than some and less than others." So what. It's grace.

Maybe somebody's thinking, "Ok Aaron, that's all great, but how does that affect my daily life?" I'll tell you how, along with grace comes freedom, along with grace comes power, along with grace comes new eyes to see the world in a new way. Take a look at this.

When sin entered, grace went out the back door. On Christmas, God says, "Grace is back! And it's coming in the form of a little baby that you don't deserve. He'll grow up to live a life that you could never live. He going to die on a cross for sins that he didn't commit. And he's going to pay for all your sins and you don't deserve one single bit of it. And when finally realize that there's no what to reach God on your own. When you finally come with outstretched arms and receive, not earn, receive it, it changes everything." In Christmas, grace is back. And for today, that's the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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