

“Christmas with Grace—The Most Expensive Christmas”

A couple weeks ago we started this series of messages called “Christmas with Grace”. We looked at how what’s missing in our world is exactly that. It’s grace. **Grace is the willingness to give people exactly what they don’t deserve.** And that’s a challenge because we live in a world that tells us to do unto others exactly as they have done unto me. Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. You disrespect me, I disrespect you. You gossip about me, I gossip about you. Many of us were raised in religious environments where we were taught that God is going to do unto us as we had done unto others or done unto God. Many of us have been taught that our relationship with God is a very simple cause and effect relationship—If I, then you.

But the reason God took on human form, dwelt among us, took up residence with us, the reason for Christmas, is God’s way of bringing grace back into the world. At Christmas we celebrate the reintroduction of grace back into the relationship between God and humanity. It was God’s way of announcing, “Because of Jesus, I will no longer do unto you as you deserve for me to do unto you. Through Jesus and the gift of grace and the gift of righteousness that comes through him to you, I can now give humanity exactly what you don’t deserve.”

Through Jesus we can be in a right standing with God, not based on our performance, not based on our obedience, not based on our righteousness, but on his. The choice for us is to receive that gift. The no-strings-attached gift of a right standing with God. It sounds too good to be true, but that’s the nature of grace.

At Christmas God gave us the most expensive gift he could give. He gave us exactly what we needed the most and deserved the least. What it means is that we have a relationship with God that is unconditional, our sins have been forgiven, and all we have to do is receive that gift of a right standing with him. But that choice is ours. To receive or not to receive.

Today we look at the big question: **What are forgiven, accepted, grace-covered, loved people supposed to do about all the unforgiving, ungraceful, unaccepting, unloving people in our lives?** If you’ve receive this free gift of grace, a right standing with God, not based on what you’ve done but on what was done for you, what are you supposed to toward people who are unforgiving, ungraceful, unloving people?

The answer is all too clear, isn’t it? The answer is that we are to do for others what our Heavenly Father has done for us. But that doesn’t come natural for me, maybe not for you. I’m a Christian and it’s hard for me. I know that God has given me what I don’t deserve, but I’m having a hard time giving you exactly what you don’t deserve.

So what are forgiven, accepted, grace-covered, loved people to do about the unforgiving, unaccepting, ungraceful, unloving people in our lives? In our families, in our neighborhoods, in our circle of friends?

Jesus, gives us the answer. He makes it pretty clear in John chapter 13. Jesus says this, **“I give you a new command, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34, NRSV).** First of all, what does Jesus mean by a new command? There’s nothing new about that. Jesus says, “Love one another.” We’re like, “Jesus, I got that. I don’t need to write that down. I’m good with loving one another. Well, I’m good at it as long as I get to pick who the one anothers are. The one anothers are my two kids, at least until they get old enough to really rebel. My wife is a one another. Who couldn’t love Janet! There’s my extended family—they’re one anothers. I’ve got a handful of friends who are my one anothers. I love them. I live this out, baby! As long as I get to define the one anothers.”

Jesus point is, that’s the old command. What’s new is the scope of this love. The scope, the range, the extent. That’s what’s new.

“So Jesus, you’re not telling me to love the people I already love, are you?” That would be like me telling my kids to eat candy. “You will eat that candy.” “Oh Daddy, anything but that!” I don’t ever have to tell my kids to eat candy. They don’t need a command about that from me. But they do need me to command them to eat the foods that will help them grow and be healthy.

Jesus says this is a new command. It’s in the same category of some of the other things he taught like, “Pray for those who persecute you”—that’s new! I barely pray for my friends. He said, “Love your enemies” – that new, too! He’s saying, “I’m not asking you to love the people you already love. You don’t need me to tell

you that. I'm not asking you to extend grace to people who extend grace to you. That's the old teaching. I'm talking about something brand new where you extend the same kind of love that I loved you with."

Jesus' disciples would have understood. Matthew was standing there. He was a hated tax collector when Jesus walked up to him and asked him to come join the team. Come follow me. Matthew's like, "Oh yeah. That kind of love." Later on, Peter would get this. He would remember that Jesus invited him into his inner circle knowing that he would betray Jesus. Peter would later think, "Oh yeah. That kind of love." Judas would look back and realize that that kind of love included him. That's the new part. The scope of this love, the range, the extent of this love is further.

Jesus goes on in verse 35 and says, "**By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another**" (John 13:35). By "this," he says. And "this" is not going to church on Sundays. "This" isn't how much of the Bible you know. "This" isn't how much you pray or how well you pray. "This" isn't if you're in a small group, or how much money you give, or the fish on your car, or your cross necklace. By "This" by the fact that you love the one another that are hard to love. "By this, more than anything else in your life, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Jesus would say to me, "Aaron, I'm not talking about your kids, and your wife, and your best friends." This is the, "over the top, why would you do that, why would you go there, why would you invite them, kind of love." It's the kind of love that causes people to ask the key question, "Why?" "You're going to let who, come over for Christmas? Why? You're giving him that gift? Why?" This kind of love makes people say, "What is up with that?" And your only answer is, "I'm just trying to extend the kind of grace to others that was first extended to me by my Heavenly Father."

That's the kind of grace I talked about last week in how that Amish community reached out to wife and kids of the man who murdered their children. How they reached out to the father of the man who killed their children. How they made a public statement of forgiveness and so many people said, "Why?" They said, "Because we've been given that kind of grace. And we know we're to give that kind of grace."

This grace, it's a choice for us to receive it from God. It's also a choice for us to give to others. But what is the alternative to offering this kind of love, this kind of grace and forgiveness? In his book *What's So Amazing About Grace*, Philip Yancey tells the true story of one family. Daisy was born in 1898, one of ten kids. Times were rough and made rougher by an alcoholic father who abused the kids and their mother. Eventually Daisy's dad kicked her mom out, and it wasn't long before all the kids were farmed out to other family members. Daisy grew up bitter toward her dad. She hated him for what he did to their family. Eventually their father disappeared and all the kids went about their hard lives—all of them ended up dropping out of school to support themselves.

Many years later Daisy's dad showed up. He'd gotten sober and was finding all his kids in an attempt to apologize and restore some semblance of relationship with them. His kids, grown with families of their own, were skeptical, but over time he won them all over, except Daisy. He ended up living just a few doors down from Daisy, with her sister, but she would never speak to him.

Daisy was determined to not be like her dad. She never touched a drop of alcohol, but she tyrannized her family in a different way. This was during the Great Depression and she would often lie on her couch exhausted and scream at her 6 kids to shut up. She would yell, "Why did I ever have you stupid kids anyway? You ruined my life!" She would occasionally whip her kids just assuming they'd done something bad.

One of Daisy's daughters was Margaret. She wanted to be different from her mother who would never apologize, never soften. Margaret's life had its own struggles. One of her sons, Michael, got cross-ways with her in the 60's. The way he dressed, the way he talked, the way he let his hair grow, that he smoked pot. She threatened him, scolded him, reported him to a judge, wrote him out of her will. Nothing worked, so she kicked him out. He ended up living in a hippie commune. She finally told him one day, "I never want to see you again as long as I live." And for 26 years that's the way it was.

Michael wanted to be different from his mother. His quest just led him from one woman, to another, to another. After his second marriage his anger and bitterness were always just under the surface. Anything would bring them out.

It was like ungrace had been handed down from one generation, to the next, to the next, to the next.

You know, when Jesus said, "A new command I give you, love one another." When he gave us that command we may think, "Oh Jesus, it is so hard to love those who are ungrateful, ungraceful, unforgiving, unloving, unaccepting." His response is, "As hard as it is, it's better than the alternative. It is so much better than living with bitterness, and ungrace that eats you up and gets passed along like a virus to others."

Grace breaks the cycle--grace that gets lived out in forgiveness, in love, in acceptance that is often never returned. Even though it might never get returned, it breaks the cycle.

But you have to know that grace is expensive. If you decide to extend grace to those one another who are hard to love, it may be the most expensive Christmas present ever. Because grace always requires a death. Think about Jesus. It wasn't enough for him to be born to humanity, it wasn't enough for him to teach, to demonstrate love, to show the world what the heart of God is really like. That wasn't enough, he also had to die. That was ultimately how we knew what grace was.

Now I'm not telling you that you have to die. I'm telling you that something will have to die. Some pride, some resentment, some memories, some hard feelings, desires to get even, desires to keep your distance, some desires to keep score.

Maybe you're in high school or college and your parents are divorced and during the holidays you bounce back and forth and you love your mom, but can't stand your dad, or love your dad and can't stand your mom. And they're remarried and there's all that awkwardness. What do your parents deserve the least from you, but maybe need the most? How about you wrap that up and give it to them? You may never have thought about it, but your parents long for your acceptance. Your step-parents long for it too.

Or maybe you're grown and your parents are older and trying to get through to them is like trying to chisel through granite. "They don't care! It doesn't register! They don't feel it!" So what. Grace does not require them to care, or register or feel it. And it may surprise you at some point that they do. "They're not going to change!" Exactly, that's why it's going to require change. Giving them exactly what they don't deserve but need the most. Just like your Heavenly Father did for you.

Maybe you've got to deal with an ex-spouse. So many chapters in your life, that you wish you could undo or rewrite, have to do with that man or woman. Here it comes and it's Christmas and everybody tries to smile, but everybody's defensive, and everybody's watching their back, and watching every word. What does it look like to bring grace into that relationship? What do they not deserve but need the most from you?

Maybe it's an in-law. Maybe you've got to travel a long way. "We've got to travel 6 hours and spend three whole days!" It feels like three weeks! What does it look like to bring grace into a situation of tension? Hey, Jesus came into the world for 33 years and put up with us, aren't you glad you don't have to stay for 33 years? Just 3 days!

Where in your world is there a need for grace? Who in your world has that need for grace and everything inside you says, "No!" But God's saying "Yes. This year I want you to spend more than you ever planned to spend, I want you to give the gift of grace to that person who expects the least and needs it the most." Who needs to be understood, who needs to be forgiven, who needs to be listened to, who needs a physical touch? Who needs eye to eye contact? What is it that they need the most, but don't deserve, but you could bring? Grace. And they may never change. And they may never recognize something is different in you, but that doesn't matter. It's not about them. It's about grace. Maybe that's what needs to die. Your expectations that someone will change because you have. Grace always requires a death.

And let's face it, one of the barriers to grace is our "but." All my excuses and your excuses start with that word, "but." But he, but she, but they... Please listen to my story. But, but, but. All our excuses that start with the word "but" are overshadowed at Christmas. Because at Christmas it's not, "But he, but she, but they." At Christmas it's, "But God..." Bigger, greater, more powerful than any of our excuses. **"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).** God demonstrates his own grace, his own grace, while we were still sinners. While I was still unforgiving, ungrateful. While I was still unaccepting and ungraceful. While I was still in my sin, Christ died for me and

you. But God...God demonstrates his love, before we even know it's there. Suddenly all my, "But he, but she, but they..." it dissolves in the presence of, "But God..."

What needs to die for you be able to live with grace? Is it your need to keep score, like me? Is it a desire to get revenge? The need to punish somebody? The drive to make sure somebody doesn't get away with something? That need to be the judge? What needs to die? Maybe it's the need for you to always be right. To always correct people who skew the facts. To always get in the last word, the last joke, the best clever remark. To make sure that people understand your side of the story. Maybe that needs to die. Maybe your need to be apologized to needs to die. All those things that we try to extract from people, need to die.

Oh, and the death always precedes the offer of grace. I've got to see and know what I'm trying to extract from people so that it can die, or all I'll do is offer a trade. I'll do this if you do that. And if it's a trade, it's not grace. "I tried to be nice to him and it didn't work. I tried to forgive, but it didn't work. I tried to put the past behind me and it didn't work. I did my part and they didn't do theirs. They did change." That's because you were trying to do a trade. And grace isn't a trade. That has to die.

What Jesus offers you is not a trade. He says, "What I've done for you is always there for you to receive, no matter what, even if you reject me, even if you deny me, even if you dishonor me, it's always there. The offer stands."

If you look at the front of your program there's a little place there for you to tear off. It's not perforated so just grip it and rip it. It looks like a gift. This is the takeaway today. It's the takeaway for this whole series. It all boils down to this. Because on that piece of paper with a gift on it, there are three blanks. One says, Who?: One says, How? One says: What needs to die? Fill in those blanks. Who in your world needs grace from you and how can you extend it. I'm not talking 10 people or 5 or even 2. Just one. And I realize that because of who you are with this morning you may have to write in code. You may want to put initials...make a mental note. But don't leave this morning without writing down, noting, who needs your grace, and how you will extend it. And what needs to die in order for that to happen. I realize that this may be the most expensive gift you will give this Christmas because grace requires a death. Please take a minute...

Carry that piece of paper with you until you give the gift.

At Christmas, God brought grace back, and gave us the source of power we need to bring grace back to graceless relationships. Imagine the impact of a thousand gifts of grace going out into our community this Christmas. That's a lot of grace, that's a lot of death, that's a lot of potential change. And for today that is Good News of great joy for all people. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

I thank Rev. Andy Stanley, Senior Pastor of North Point Church in Atlanta for his resources. I also thank Philip Yancey for his amazing insight and resources in his book [What's So Amazing About Grace?](#)