

Sunday, October 10, 2021

Growing in Grace

(Message 6; Series: *Extreme Discipleship: Living into our Mission*)
(Colossians 2:8-23)

Scripture:

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

⁹For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self-ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

¹⁶Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. ¹⁸Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. ¹⁹They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

²⁰Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: ²¹"Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? ²²These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. ²³Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their

false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Message:

Jim's style is to help stranded motorists. One Sunday, coming home from church, he drove his old Plymouth to the side of the road behind a new but malfunctioning Cadillac. All in one motion, he parked, opened the door, stepped out, and called: "You need any help, lady?" A Ford following, even older than Jim's Plymouth, missed Jim by inches, hooked his door, and ripped it off its hinges. While he waited for the police, Jim picked up the door and put it in the back seat. It didn't even look out of place with the other junk. The driver's side looked a bit vacant without a door. To the police, Jim took full responsibility. He had obstructed traffic. All that happened before the police and old Ford left Jim carried off with style. But when he said again to the lady still stranded in the new Cadillac as though he had been momentarily detained, "You need any help, mama?" That was grace.

You can know the right thing. You can even do the right thing. But the world is tired of Christians who say and do the right things but don't do it with grace.

Without grace, people get hurt. Without grace, people get scared. Without grace, there's no life with a capital "L."

Grace is the one thing the Church has to offer that people can't get anywhere else. Anyone can build homes for the homeless, feed the poor, or donate to charity. You don't have to be a Christian to affect social or political change. There are other traditions and teachers that offer wise, moral instruction.

But only the Church offers grace, and more grace, and endless grace—at least it is supposed to.

In the real world "*You reap what you sow.*" There is no free lunch. It's an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Only Church can say: "*You were lost; now you are found. You were guilty, now you've been pardoned. You were dead, now you've been made alive.*"

Survivalist sects and polygamous groups. Hollywood stars trumpeting Scientology. Atheistic scholars advocating naturalism. The advertising industry pushing materialism. Secularism promotes "Nones." Our culture has almost as many worldviews as we've got people. Sadly, in North America, the influence of the Church is decreasing, and the impact of "deceptive philosophies" is increasing.

Paul is concerned about the [Colossae] church's worldview. He writes, "*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy*" (2:8). There is a lot of bad theology floating around – not only in

Paul's day, but every day since then – and that can really mess up people and entire churches.

Paul reminds the Colossian believers to be aware of this and to remember what they have experienced in Christ. Paul knows in their early life, many of them had been ruled by the desires of the world, but now, in Jesus they had put those ways aside and experienced the new life only Jesus can bring. In their new life they had received forgiveness from sin, freedom from guilt, and authority in Christ. This was no time to forget; this was no time to regress.

Paul marvels at the wonder of the ultimate expression of grace—the cross, even though God has been a gracious God since the beginning of the world. But Paul understands the ultimate expression of grace is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was nailed to the cross, by his own volition.

A DESCRIPTION OF GRACE

Paul summarizes the supremacy, sufficiency, and sovereignty of Jesus again here: “*For in Christ, all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form and in Christ you have been brought to fullness*” (2:9-10). Because we have been brought to Christ and are “in Christ”, we have his fullness. Paul is saying, “Since we have His fullness, there is no need to go anywhere else or look for anything additional. We have Jesus; he is all we need.”

Paul is so overwhelmed with Jesus, he uses a series of pictures to ingrain what God has done into our mind, heart, and soul.

First, in 2:11f, Paul invites us to picture some legalists in the church (every church seems to have a few) saying, “*You can't be part of the family unless you get circumcised*” (...make public profession of faith, contribute through the envelopes, attend worship every week; that is, do it our way).

While we tend to focus on the outside, God, Paul says, is focused on the inside (“*with a circumcision not performed by human hands*”). We need to recognize and celebrate what God is doing.

The real issue is that once these Gentiles were outside of the family of God and now, by Christ's grace and power, they are included, they are inside the family of God. God is building his church

We know the pain being on the “outside”—not being picked for team, spurned by one you loved; betrayed by a “friend,” held at distance by spouse. We were Gentiles. Imagine wanting to be a part of God's family and being told, “Sorry...you have to do this and this and this...” Then God shows up and says, “No, no, I chose you!” “I want you!” “You are my child!” That's all it takes. That's grace, and we are part of the family—the only family—that lasts forever. That's grace! (Family Portrait)

Second, in **2:12f**, Paul takes our “union with Christ” up a notch. He reminds us that when we trust in Jesus, we are united in Christ, so where Christ goes, we go; what he does, we do. Paul says – you and I were there at his crucifixion (we suffered with him), at his death (we needed to die to our old self), and at this resurrection (he has made us new). This is symbolized in our baptism where we are placed under the water (death) and then raised above the water (life). God does this and it changes everything. (Baptism Picture)

Third, in **2:13f**, Paul invites us to picture ourselves as dead to God; we’ve all been there. Maybe you’ve had this sense of awe, but had no one to thank; maybe you felt this overwhelming guilt, but had no one to forgive you; perhaps you were longing for purpose in life, but had no one to serve; maybe you were overwhelmed with fear, and had no source of hope.

Then one day you were made alive to God. God stepped in and cleaned up your mess – forgave your sins, canceled your indebtedness, and made you right with God. Suddenly, you have strength to endure, the power to serve, a reason to hope, and someone to thank. Death no longer has a hold on you. You had nothing to do with it; it was all grace.

“Canceling the charge of our legal indebtedness” cancels the huge moral debt we owe God. (Did you hear about the person who got an overdraft notice so he sent the bank a check to cover it?). We all have insufficient funds. We can’t pay the debt.

But God takes our indebtedness, our guilt, our shame and nails it to the cross. He erases the debt without making a dent in the reservoir of His grace. God rips up our IOU. We’re free! Don’t overlook the three letter “All”. All our sins are forgiven; no sin is too great, too dark, too horrendous for him to forgive. He forgives everything! (*Paid in Full bill*)

There is a fourth picture in **2:15**. This is a hard verse, a more challenging picture to interpret. In 1st century, when a Roman general triumphed in battle, he was given a ticker-tape parade through streets of Rome (similar to what the Jews were trying to do with Jesus on Palm Sunday). The opposing (losing) generals would have to march at end of parade, “disarmed” of their weapons, humbly paying tribute to the winning general.

Triumph is hardly a word a passer-by would have used to explain what was happening that Friday afternoon while Jesus hung on the cross on Golgotha’s hill. But the cross was not a defeat of Christ at the hands of the powers, it was the defeat of the powers at the hands – the bloody, nail-printed hands – of Jesus Christ. There is nothing to add. It was done, complete.

With the cross and resurrection, all the “former powers” (i.e., death, guilt, evil, shame, financial/political/structural powers...) have been stripped of

their power to cause ultimate harm and God is making a public spectacle of them. They have been defeated! (Picture a Tickertape Parade)

The resurrection is the beginning of the parade; it isn't quite up to the block where we are standing yet, but we can see it coming; meanwhile we can have confidence each day until we're home.

THE DEFINITION

Paul understands the Church is the custodian of God's grace. Paul started this letter talking about grace (1:2): *To the saints and faithful in Christ: Grace...*

Normally Greek letters started with "Chairo" (i.e. greetings); like "Dear so and so" - whether "dear" or not, it is kind of a standard cliché. Paul changes it to: "Charis" (lit. "*may grace be sent to you.*")

Paul ends this letter (4:18) saying: *"I write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. (lit.) May Grace linger with you."*

Everything in between in Colossians is also about grace for Paul. Grace knocked Paul down on the road to Damascus; grace brought him to his knees over his sin; grace took his sin away; grace gave Paul a thorn in the flesh to keep him from being destroyed by arrogance; grace made Paul's weakness the home of God's strength.

God told Paul: *"My grace is sufficient for you..."* Grace is the first, middle and last word. **Grace defined Paul's life; he never lost his wonder of grace. Grace must define our lives - and the life of the Church - as well.**

THE DEVIATION

If grace is so wonderful, why do we set it aside so quickly? That is, why are churches filled with such ungracious people who have personally experienced so much grace? Why, according to Barna Research, is [evangelical] Christianity synonymous with a political agenda, hypocrisy, judgementalism, self-righteousness—but never grace? Why does Philip Yancey in his book, *"What's so Amazing about Grace?"* quotes a lonely prostitute saying, "I'd never go to church!"?

Some say it is pride. They note that when we're desperate, on our knees, our back to the wall, we're desperate for every ounce of grace. But when we're no longer desperate, we eagerly want to take credit for our accomplishments.

Tom Watson, CEO of a Fortune 500 Company, stopped at a gas station with his wife. While Tom is in paying, his wife started a conversation with the attendant. Back on the road, she tells Tom they went to high school together and even dated. Tom said, "I'll bet you're thinking you're glad you married me,

or you could be the wife of an attendant.” She replied, “No, I was actually thinking if I had married him instead of you, he’d be a Fortune 500 CEO and you’d be a gas station attendant.” (Both Tom and his wife want the credit).

We slowly push grace out of the equation. We lose the awe and wonder of it; and we fail to be grateful for it.

In a message on the Prodigal Son, Fred Craddock retold the story leaving out grace. In his version, the father goes to oldest brother: *“For all your years of labor in the field, I’ve kill the fatted calf and I’m throwing you a party. Here’s your robe and ring. You’ve earned it.”* When he was finished with the story, a woman stood up and said, “That’s the way it should have been from the beginning. He got his Father’s love the good old fashion way—he earned it!”

I’m glad my Father’s love isn’t earned the old fashion way or I’d be in big trouble. I don’t just want to know or do the right thing, I want grace.

So how do we live in grace without abusing it. That is, how do we proclaim and celebrate grace without making it a license to sin (You know, sin more so grace can abound more)?

Jude 4 warns: *“Certain intruders have stolen in among you, people who pervert the grace of our God in licentiousness and deny our only master and Lord Jesus Christ.”*

People say, *“There’s always grace, so it doesn’t matter what I do.”* That’s wrong. Grace is not God’s soft side; grace doesn’t mean God gives us everything we want or looks the other way. Grace doesn’t mean the consequences of bad behavior are automatically removed.

The prodigal son came back, fell on his knees, and repented - and then his father forgave him. When he was far from home and he had money, he had friends and engaged in dissolute living. But one day, he woke up and his money was gone - and so were his friends. He slopped pigs to eat. Then something brought him to his knees. It was a humiliating and painful experience.

One who lies brazenly, lusts without regret, betrays friends to get ahead, cheats without scruples, all in the spirit of defiance and mockery, suddenly looks at himself in mirror with horror. That painful experience is grace.

Jesus doesn’t say the father searched for his son, and while he was living dissolutely, the father gave him a feast, a robe, and a ring. No. First things first. Grace helps people come home to face the Father; if you don’t want to come, you don’t need grace.

A “Christian” was having an affair. He said, “It may be wrong, but God will give me the grace.” He probably doesn’t want grace, because God’s grace will first bring him to his knees, and it won’t be pretty. Many people are looking

for – and expect – grace to be comfortable and pain free. If that’s what you’d like, don’t ask for grace. Grace will do whatever it takes to bring you home.

Grace is not immunity to the consequences of one’s sinful living or an opportunity to disregard the spirit’s leading. If you have been looking for that, it will not happen. Make the resolve, the phone call, the confession; spend the time in prayer. Ask for his grace, so you can come home to the Father.

THE DIFFERENCE

So how do we live into Grace?

A. First, we need to live close to the cross...

We need to regularly engage in self-examination and confession. We need our IOU nailed to that cross because when we’re acutely aware of our fallenness, it’s harder to be judgmental about others; when I’m intensely aware of my need for grace, I’m more gracious.

I’ve had to appear in court the last couple of weeks (Got summoned to appear for jury duty ☺). Three criminal cases need juries. “Some people have really messed up their lives”.

Haven’t we all. I hurt the people I love the most. I (intentionally) distort things I say. When I look at the cross and remember I am desperately dependent on grace, it is easier to be gracious.

I would suggest we put the word “Grace” where it will remind us of how necessary it is. Put it on your bathroom mirror, your refrigerator (more time there than by the mirror), on your wallet (there are stickers in the back). Use it as a reminder to ask for grace, to thank God for his grace, to offer grace to some who desperately needs it. Remember grace comes from the cross...

Second, we need to live close to grace-giving people.

We need people who accept, welcome, and love us no matter what; we need gracious people in our lives to counter-balance the grace impaired people in our life who are constantly judging us.

Life can be lonely. Loneliness breeds problems. We need people to walk together with us in the tough times: listening, praying, offering words of encouragement, just being there.

Grace-giving people are not those who ignore your shortcomings and character challenges, they are simply people who are not repelled or repulsed by our humanness. They are the people who love you enough to share the truth with you in love.

Do you have grace-giving people like that in your life? Spend more time with them. Don't have anyone, ask God to send you one so you can receive more and more of His grace.

Third, we need to stay close to people who need grace so we can offer them grace.

This is what the Church is all about – people who have found His grace sharing it with people who desperately need His Grace.

Grace filled people need to get around people who are lost; confused, and don't know God. Grace filled people need to get close to sinners, to people who need grace. Grace filled people share their time, their faith, and their love with people who need grace. (Our spiritual practice this month is to connect with people we have been praying for).

That is what Jesus did—over and over; he spent time with those who didn't deserve it. It got Jesus into all kinds of trouble, but it never stopped him.

In *"The Kingdom of God is a Party,"* Tony Campolo tells his Honolulu party story:

Campolo had traveled from East Coast, so he woke at 3 a.m. every morning. One morning he went to a dinner near the hotel for coffee. A group of women, obviously prostitutes, came in. One, Agnes, said it was her birthday tomorrow; another scoffed, "What do you want, a birthday party?" "No, I don't expect that. Nobody has ever had a birthday party for me." They all left.

Tony asks Harry, guy behind counter, "They come in here every night?" "Yea."

Tony: "I'd like to come back tomorrow and throw a birthday party for Agnes." "Okay." Guy's wife comes out of the back room: "Agnes is one of those people who's really nice. Nobody ever does anything for her."

Tony: "I'll be back about 2:30 to decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake." Harry: "No way, it's my place, I'll make the cake."

Tony was back at 2:30 a.m. with paper decorations, made big pieces of cardboard saying, 'Happy Birthday, Agnes.'

Word had gotten out about the party." It was wall-to-wall prostitutes. At 3:30, the diner door opened, and Agnes and her friend came in. Everyone screamed, 'Happy Birthday!' Agnes was stunned. Her mouth feel open, her legs buckled. Her friend led her to one of the stools. Everyone sang "happy birthday" to her. When the birthday cake with candles came out, she lost it and cried. Harry mumbled, 'Blow out the candles, Agnes, or I'll have to do it.' After a few seconds, he did.

"Now cut the cake, Agnes, we all want a piece." She looked at the cake, and asked softly, "Harry, is it okay if we don't eat it right away?" Harry said, "Sure. You can take it home if you want to." "I can?" She looked at Tony: "I

just live a couple doors down. I'll take the cake home and be right back, I promise."

She left. There was a stunned silence. Tony: "What do you say we pray?" And Tony prayed for Agnes, for salvation, for her life to change, for God's blessing

When he finished, Harry said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher! What kind of church do you belong to?" (In one of those few times when the right words came] Tony said, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." Harry: "No, you don't. If there was, I'd join it."

That is the kind of church Jesus came to create. If you don't believe that, read the Gospels again. Jesus shows grace to prostitutes, publicans, lepers, and sinners. The publicans and the sinners loved Jesus because he spent time with them; lepers found in him someone who would eat and drink with them.

There's no greater joy than being able to share God's grace with someone who needs it.

"Who can you bring to the party?" Someone in your office, neighborhood, gas station, grocery store is waiting for your invitation. We have the one thing they can't get anywhere else - grace: grace wrapped in swaddling clothes, grace that healed the sick, cured the blind and raised the dead; grace that earned Jesus the name, "friend of sinners."

It was grace that nailed him to the cross with our sin and guilt; it was grace that the tomb couldn't hold him; it was grace that will one day return for you and me.

Please stand for closing prayer.

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