

Grace Really Is Amazing

Psalm 32: 1-5

Luke 15: 11-32

When asked what's unique about Christianity, author C.S. Lewis had the perfect answer. "Oh, that's easy," answered Lewis. "It's grace." Lewis explained that Christianity uniquely claims that God's love comes free of charge, no strings attached. No other religion makes that same claim. He's right, of course.

It's too bad we're so deficient in the practice of grace. People are busy sorting out who is good, worthy, and deserving – the good people like us – as opposed to those who are scrutinized, measured, and judged – the bad people or simply them.

You may recall how the context preceding the parable of the barren fig tree last Sunday notes two tragedies; one is the killing of Galileans in or by the Temple – 'their blood was mixed with their sacrifice' – and another mentioned by Jesus about a collapsed water tower in Siloam that killed 18 Jerusalemites. Jesus was questioned about the sinfulness of these victims, because surely they suffered these tragedies because of their sinfulness in punishment by God. Jesus challenges such thinking that sorts people into neat categories defined by whatever befalls them in life. This way, if someone is rich, they're righteous and blessed; if poor, then a sinner and cursed. Jesus mocks this foolishness by telling the parable of the barren fig tree.

That brings us back to grace which frankly is more than amazing; it's absolutely confounding. We may understand the basics of what's involved, but grace's stunning ways and profound depths remain challenging. Let's see what more our scriptures can tell us.

Psalm 32 has a probing awareness of the burden of sinfulness on those seeking to be faithful to God.

It begins by celebrating the faithful who have been blessed with forgiveness. The greatness of this gift is well understood by a people whose devotional life is oriented to law and legalisms, to ritual and sacrifice. Both law and ritual are transcended by the sovereignty of God whose grace lifts the sins from the sinful person.

The psalmist recognizes a process which the believer must pursue, which we reflect in our worship today. The psalmist wrote, *When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me, my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.* The affliction of unconfessed sinfulness brings a withering of the spirit, and with it, a withering of the person. Nothing is working. Nothing prospers. Weariness drags down the spirit.

Once sin was fully confessed and a candid admission of wrongdoing occurred, then there was relief through God's forgiveness, a liberation from the burden of sinfulness. The psalmist concludes, *Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord.*

The psalmist doesn't pretend that sinless perfection is attainable by a mortal. Rather, he points out the need to **reckon** with our sinfulness rather than hiding it and feigning righteousness. He tells us to bring our sinfulness before God in humility and repentance, and to trust in the forgiving love of our Father-Creator.

Forgiveness requires a measure of grace by the one harmed or offended. If I have been afflicted by a sinful act, I'm expected to set aside my claims for compensation from the wrongdoing. The one who wronged me acknowledges a debt that is owed and affirms the legitimacy of the debt, the truth of the sin. Further, the one who wronged me seeks my grace, that I might cancel the debt, forgiving it freely and completely. If someone does that, admitting the harmful act sincerely, how can I not forgive? This is what God does for me.

Seen in debt terms, we can understand why it's important for the sinful person to understand and appreciate the debt they owe, the extent of their sinfulness. To seek the forgiving grace of the one owed, the nature of the debt must be understood. If you come to the one owed and claim the debt is just a \$50 matter, but he knows it is a \$50,000 matter, then he'd be offended by your cheap suggestion that trivializes a substantial debt. So it would seem to God, if we should imagine – like the psalmist – that we could hide the true amount of our debt.

Some folks don't like what I write as a prayer of confession, 'it's too harsh,' 'I'm not so bad,' 'those aren't my sins.' I always hope that our prayer of confession is a worthy admission of the debt that we owe in our sinfulness before God. The time of silence in our confessional prayer allows the worshiper to present their sins in their way before God. God's grace is generous and unbounded; we dare not cheapen it with a confession that either hedges, hides, or trivializes our sinfulness, our debt.

The terms that would gain the blessing of grace and forgiveness would seem to be well outlined now. Come before God. Acknowledge the debt of our sin, the full sin, the full debt. Ask for mercy, forgiveness, and grace. Right?

The story of the prodigal son is a reflection of the exceptional terms of God's amazing grace as well as an exposé of **un**graciousness. I won't review all the familiar details except to say that the younger son was a fool, providing the first example of ingratitude by claiming what he did not necessarily have coming to him – his inheritance from his still-living father. He blows the whole amount and finds himself destitute.

This journey home was weighted with a heavy load of shame and failure. He had brought shame on himself, on his father, and even on his Father God. In his shame, he realized that he was "no longer worthy to be called [his father's] son." Quite frankly, there's little to argue about; this younger son *deserved* to lose everything, even his relational standing as son to the father. He earned it!

Yet, the father's actions are revealing. The text says: *But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him* – like we see on the bulletin cover. Upon seeing his scandalous child, the father is filled **not** with judgment or condemnation as he could be quite justifiably. Instead, the father is overcome with gracious compassion and forgiveness. The text makes it clear that the father **did not need to hear** his son's confession of guilt *before* he was moved with compassion. Coming home to him was enough for the father to be joyful that his child had returned – the one who was lost was now found.

Apart from God, away from “home” with our heavenly Creator, we're lost and beyond reach when we make our home in the world, squandering our promise, our inheritance of life amid bondage to the ways of worldly sinfulness. We exchange our spiritual inheritance for a material one, for shallow, fleeting, vulnerable trinkets, comforts, and stored wealth. Our sad state of sinfulness is made even more acute by our self-righteousness and our pride that refuses to admit failure, or allow shame, or feel remorse at wrongdoing. We look askance at the poor, thinking that our wise decisions and faithful piety have brought us blessings. We bristle at the notion that we have enjoyed privileges from birth that others never encountered, and that our birth status was the advantage that was most determinative of how our lives evolved so successfully.

When we reflect the younger son and make the journey to return, it is done with steps of repentance. We seek true life, genuine peace, and real fulfillment as only God provides it, seeking God's healing, God's grace. Like the father in the parable, God meets **us** on our way and shares his joy in the painfully difficult walk that we've chosen to undertake.

Now the elder son, who did nothing so foolish, so shameful, **or** so sinful as his younger brother, has become angry and indignant. The elder son's role in the story is the mirror to us to which we should pay the most attention. The elder son reveals **our** normal reaction to the foolish, shameful and sinful among us. This is our reaction to grace unmerited by others and yet granted. In our arrogance, we're sure that **we deserve** grace, but **not them**.

There's a sad assumption in our society that people receiving government assistance are moochers. We judge them, condemn them, demanding that the government stop giving away *our* tax dollars to these people.

But us? We deserve our low capital gains tax rate, corporations deserve government incentives, and “get your hands off my Medicare!” No one can judge us, condemn us, and demand that the government stop giving away tax dollars to us. We deserve what we get; we earned it, right?

That brings us to the elder brother. The elder brother reflects judgment, condemnation, jealousy, and self-righteousness. It's intended that **we** should relate to the elder brother; that's why he's in the story. You didn't identify too closely to the

younger brother, did you? You would never be such a worthless scallawag. Knowing how people regard themselves, Jesus served up the elder son for you and for me.

The elder son is the very opposite of the compassion, grace, and forgiveness of his father. We might feel some sympathy for the elder brother, seeing how his younger was so ungracious in demanding his share of the inheritance, leaving him behind to do all the work, and then getting a celebration when the loser returns. Indeed, *this elder son would even condemn his father* for such a rich feast.

This brilliant parable provides us with such rich displays of grace and its opposite that it is no wonder that it remains one of the most cherished throughout the ages. This story speaks to each generation in every time. It speaks to us.

You realize that we **don't** get what we deserve. And that's a good thing, because *we deserve far less* than we've received. The moment we think we have somehow come to **deserve** the grace of God's blessing, that we have been so righteous and so worthy to have **earned** the forgiveness we receive, then we prove how undeserving, how spiritually impoverished, and how very wrong we are.

The riches of God's grace and love await the one who makes the awkward and uncomfortable journey through their sinfulness and self-righteousness onto the pathway of confession and repentance. It is particularly about the one who says that **the other** who was lost and is now found, who did everything wrong while you did everything right, **still** brings **you** joy and thanksgiving, not contempt, jealousy, and condemnation.

This Lenten season is the time for all of God's faithful to come before God, to make that wilderness journey that seeks a promised land of grace, peace, and abundance with the Lord. Those steps are the first and greatest part of God's blessing of grace for new life for his sinful people.

And in our repentance, we need to make sure that we examine carefully the spirit of the elder brother that lurks within us, ready to leap to condemnation and judgment. Following the way of our Lord, we are called to reflect grace, reflecting like a mirror God's grace that has come to bless us.