

Accepting God's Call to Grace Heb. 12:14-29

June 29, 2014

"In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, Phillip Yancey tells the story of Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway grew up in a very devout evangelical family, and yet there he never experienced the grace of Christ. He lived a libertine life that most of us would call "dissolute"... but there was no father, no parent waiting for him and he sank into the mire of a graceless depression. A short story he wrote perhaps reveals the grace that he hoped for. It is the story of a Spanish father who decided to reconcile with his son who had run away to Madrid. The father, in a moment of remorse, takes out this ad in *El Libro*, a newspaper. "Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana, Noon, Tuesday... All is forgiven... Papa." When the father arrived at the square in hopes of meeting his son, he found eight hundred Pacoes waiting to be reunited with their father. Was Paco such a popular name? Or is a father's forgiveness the salve for every soul?" (SOURCE: Rev. Brent Eelman, D. Min. Northwoods Presbyterian Church, 1998. Taken from Sermoncentral.com)

So often when we talk about receiving the grace of God, we are speaking particularly to those who are new to the faith. We try to encourage those who have not accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior to do so. This is an appropriate action and it certainly is part of our call. As evangelicals we want to encourage all people to come to God and to receive forgiveness through Jesus Christ, to know new life and to accept the call to grace. But those of us who are not new to the faith also need to continue to accept the call to grace. The call to grace includes grace for ourselves and grace for others.

The central theme of this sermon is found in verse 15. I like how the English Standard Version puts it: "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God" (RSV). Let's take a few moments this morning and talk about this sometimes elusive but powerful word from our Christian dictionary.

I. We Must Accept God's Grace for Ourselves. We who are on the journey of walking with Jesus need the ongoing experience of God's grace. So much of a Christian's life can be spent on berating himself for how he has fallen short that he fails to accept what Jesus came to give, that is, grace. No matter how powerful our sense of personal failure, it is important to recognize the power of God's grace. We need to remember that we have come to "to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." (V. 24 NIV)

"There is a remarkable prison in Brazil. For over twenty years the government has allowed two Christians to run the prison. The prison is called "Humaita" and it runs on Christian principles. All the work is done by the prisoners, except that which is required by two full-time staff. Families outside the prison adopt an inmate to work with during and after his term. Chuck Colson tells us what he experienced when he visited the prison:

When I visited Humaita I found inmates smiling - particularly the murderer who held the keys, opened the gates and let me in. Wherever I walked I saw men at peace. I saw clean living areas, people working industriously. The walls were decorated with Biblical sayings from the Psalms and Proverbs... My guide escorted me to the notorious prison cell once used for torture. Today, he told me, that block houses only a single inmate. As we reached the end of a long concrete corridor and he put the key in the lock, he paused and asked, "Are you sure you want to go in?"

"Of course," I replied impatiently, "I've been in isolation cells all over the world." Slowly he swung open the massive door, and I saw the prisoner in that punishment cell: a crucifix, beautifully carved by the Humaita inmates - the prisoner Jesus, hanging on a cross.

"He's doing time for the rest of us," my guide said softly. (Max Lucado. In *The Grip of Grace*. Word Publishing, Dallas, Texas, 1996, pg. 113-114. Taken from Sermoncentral.com)

It's important that we remember that "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9) God's grace is still there in the midst of our failures. The experience of His grace releases us to do His work.

II. We Must Offer God's Grace to Others. The Bible says, "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God" (v. 15, RSV). Not only are we responsible for our own acceptance of grace, but also we are to watch out for our sisters and brothers. As we raise our eyes from our own soul searching to look around, we need to ask some hard questions of our church communities. Is grace abounding in our lives? Has anyone gotten lost along the way? Has anyone fallen? Is everybody here?

The inevitable answer in all our churches "is that there are people in need of a new experience of God's grace. Some have fallen; some have gotten lost; surely not everybody is here! As a result, an important part of our ministry is to continue encouraging, forgiving, and loving those who have slipped away from the experience of God's grace. We need to be a community that readily seeks, receives, and gives God's grace.

ILLUS. A woman began crying as she told her counselor that she needed forgiveness for some mistakes. The counselor assured her these guilt feelings were not appropriate and began to talk about ways she might find release.

This same woman shared with her friend how she felt so guilty that she couldn't seem to move on with her life. The friend said, "I don't know why you feel guilty. I would have done the same thing!"

Then she went to her pastor and told him that she was struggling. She shared how she had spoken to other pastors, and they had told her that she had nothing about which to feel guilty. This pastor recognized that no matter what he thought of her choices, she felt the need to experience God's grace. He sat with her and prayed with her as she confessed before God

her sins. Then he laid his hands on her head and said simply, "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven." She began to sob with joy as she had finally obtained release.

III. We Must Accept Grace in Spite of Others. The author of Hebrews goes on to tell us that it is important that we accept the grace of God so "that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." (V. 15 NIV) It is sad to see a Christian consumed by bitterness. Bitterness destroys one's sense of grace for others, as well as destroys one's personal joy.

Unfortunately, we have each had times when we have had every "right" to be bitter. One of the most difficult "wrongs" to forgive is when the one who has hurt us is from inside the church. Sometimes these are little things. Sometimes they are huge. But they begin to fester and destroy us from the inside. The scripture challenges us to accept God's call to grace.

Sometimes the pain has been so incredible it is unimaginable to forgive. Yet it is important to review the language of verses 18-19 before we decide that what is unimaginable is also impossible. Images like "burning fire," "storm," "a trumpet blast," "a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged" reveal the power of God's grace. The powerful grace of God is available to work in us in such a way that we can offer this grace to others.

To accept the call of grace sets the other person free from our hatred. It also sets us free from the pain and bitterness that once consumed our inner spirit and allows us to be filled by God's grace. Depending on the other person, there can be a beautiful restoration of friendship.

There can be a new understanding. There can be mutual love. There is also the reality of people who, though forgiven, are still dangerous in our lives. While we may be healed of bitterness, it does not necessarily mean that we enter into a restored relationship. Some people have to be released in love into God's hands.

IIILUS. "Sandy" shares her story of extending God's grace. She had been sexually abused as a child by her father. After years of therapy to deal with horrible ramifications of that experience, she did get to the place of forgiveness. She shared how others could not believe it was possible, but she had known the work of God's Spirit that enabled her to do so. She healthfully recognized the ongoing potential danger of her father and her children. So she had created safeguards. Even in the midst of those realities, she found release from the internal pain of bitterness and freedom to be filled with love.

IV. We Must Not Throw Away Our Birthright. Grace is the birthright of all who call upon the name of Jesus Christ. The Bible says, "See to it . . . that no one be immoral or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights" (V. 15-16). We need to accept the call to grace when we are tempted as Esau. We too are tempted in many ways to seek the things of this world over the things of the Spirit. We too are tempted to live our lives

with little or no awareness of God's desire for us. We too are tempted to throw away God's offering of grace for things that bring immediate satisfaction. We too are tempted at times to live as Christians, to claim Christ as Lord without receiving God's grace and being ministers of that grace. We are being offered an incredible inheritance. To throw away grace because of an insistence that "I cannot forgive" is as ridiculous as throwing away our birthright for a bowl of stew.

ILLUS. An older gentleman attended church regularly but did not take part in Holy Communion for years. When asked why this was so, he said that he knew he was not worthy. Even when the pastor shared that it is surely a gift of grace that any of us can receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, he still refused. Stubbornly this man threw away the grace that was being offered.

CONCLUSION: Sometimes we think: "Yes, grace can cover a wrong turn, a little lie; grace can enable me to forgive some wrongs - but grace cannot cover my sin; grace cannot cover my hurts or the pain inflicted on my life." The author of Hebrews wants you to know that we have not come to something that is small, touchable, something in a box. We have come to the amazing presence of God. Philip Yancy defines grace as "a gift that costs everything for the giver and nothing for the recipient." It may be hard to wrap our minds around it, but God's grace cannot be measured, and it's not cheap for God. It cost Him his son. But even with a call to grace, comes Jesus' personal call to 'go and sin no more'.

God's grace is undeserving, but that's what makes it so precious. "When we get to heaven, there will be no contest to see who was the most deserving of God's grace because no one deserves it.

There will only be one contest in heaven. When we look back and see what we were before, when we see the pit from which he rescued us, when we recall how confused we were, when we remember how God reached out and hired us into His family, and how he held us in his hand, and when we see Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us, the only contest will be to see which of us will sing the loudest:

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." (Taken from Sermoncentral.com)

The author of Hebrews says: "God is a consuming fire" (v. 29). That means we worship a God who can consume all our sins, all our pain, all our bitterness. This God calls us to grace. Accept His call to grace!