

Discipleship 101: Grace Is My Favorite
By Jason Huff
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Micah 7:18-20; Matthew 9:9-13; John 1:14-17

Our final Scripture reading today is John 1:14-17. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

Many of you have met my good friend Perry. He’s visited CrossWay a few times over the years. He lives down in Kokomo, Indiana, but before COVID struck, he spent his weekdays up here working for GM. Occasionally he’d stay the weekend and make one of our Sunday services. He’s also a regular at our Bible study still. And he has a catchphrase that is now becoming my own sort of mantra too: “Grace is my favorite.” It’s a simple sentence, not much to it, maybe a little odd when you think about it. Because when talking about favorites, we might say, “Miller Brothers’ ice cream is my favorite,” or, “the Red Wings are my favorite,” or, “Sanders’ Chocolate is my favorite.” But when all is said and done, grace is indeed my favorite.

Last week, we started our new series called **Discipleship 101**. We’ve begun talking about the basics of the faith so that anyone watching who doesn’t understand Christianity can know about it, but also primarily so that we who are believers can learn how to explain our faith to others and make more disciples. Because our calling isn’t to sit in a church pew or on our couch and hear about God and maybe sing a song or two an hour a week, but to be disciples who make other disciples. And this week, we’re going to talk about the lynchpin of our faith, which is grace. By the time we’re done today, I hope grace will be your favorite too.

But before we do that, I want us to review what we talked about last week: the big picture of how Scripture presents history, how a biblical worldview shapes how we think about the world and everything that’s happened in it. We learned there are four parts to the biblical story: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

God created it all – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit made everything there is. Our ancestors rebelled against God and fell into sin, and now we, their descendants, have a sin nature where everything we think and do is tainted by sin. The whole of creation is in some way marred by our sin and longing for a cure. But throughout history, God has provided for the redemption of His people, saving them from oppressors and guiding them toward Himself. The fullness of redemption comes in Jesus Christ, who makes it possible that all who would turn to Him in faith would be saved from sin eternally and could begin to live righteous and holy lives even now. And finally, God has a restoration plan that is not just making things like what they were, but actually improving, transforming, and recreating them so that we will eventually enjoy a new heaven and new earth, sin free, far better than anything we have ever experienced. I encourage you to listen to last week’s sermon to get all the rich details.

So let's now turn our hearts to the subject of grace, which is vital to understanding our relationship with God and how Christianity works. The author and scholar C.S. Lewis was once asked what made Christianity unique, what separated it from all the other religious beliefs out there. Now C.S. Lewis was not a pastor; despite his extensive knowledge of Christianity and a very active faith, he didn't go to seminary. He was, however, an expert on mythology, from the ancient Greek and Roman gods to Norse legends. He knew that many cultures had their own tales about creation and the apocalypse, with gods who returned from the underworld after death. While he believed Christianity to be true, he knew that these parts of the Christian story weren't explicitly unique – different from the others, sure, but not unique. But the answer was not hard for Lewis to reach. In fact, he said it was an easy question – his simple answer was, "It's grace."

Grace from the gods is not what we see in other religions and mythologies. Most of the gods are angry and need appeasement. Their demands are high – in the nations surrounding Israel, child sacrifice was common. The Roman gods were petty and vindictive, holding grudges and punishing the unworthy. Modern religions are little different. Hinduism believes in a system of reincarnation based on your works in previous lives – no grace. Even in religions that have a notion of grace, it is far different from what Christianity means by the term. Allah's grace is not free, for example; it must be earned through good deeds, which makes you question whether it's grace in the first place.

God's grace on undeserving people, showing unmerited favor on people who have no righteousness or standing of their own, sets Christianity apart. Now as we'll talk about in a moment, God shows grace in the Old Testament; grace is a part of Judaism, too, God's grace is evident there, but it's incomplete and insufficient. Christianity is a message of hope, hope for all people everywhere, and the hope we find in Jesus is because of God's grace.

God's grace is evident from the very beginning. Having told Adam and Eve that they would surely die the day that they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God allows Adam to live another 930 years. Adam committed the only sin he could, destroying his relationship with God, he goes through a spiritual death, and yet by God's grace he isn't struck down for his rebellion.

God shows grace to Abraham and chooses him to be the father of God's holy nation Israel. Abraham obeys God and it's credited to him as righteousness. But Abraham's no saint. Twice Abraham passes his beautiful wife Sarah off as his sister because he fears the local kings will kill him and take her to be their own, even though God has promised to make his descendants greater than the sand on the seashore. When it seems they can't have a child, even though God has promised him a son, Abraham goes and has a child with Sarah's maid. God chose him by grace, not because he was the most upstanding moral person.

God chooses to show Moses grace and makes him the leader of the Israelites, bringing them out of captivity in Egypt, even though Moses is a murderer. God brings them through the wilderness and gives their children the promised land, even though they grumbled against God constantly. God shows grace to David as king, even though he commits adultery and has his lover's wife killed. Even when God punishes His people for their sins, He eventually brings back a remnant to their homeland. Not because they were righteous, but because He is gracious.

God is gracious throughout the Old Testament on wayward people. Even when God brings judgment on those who defy Him, it's after unconscionable sin, continual warnings, and sometimes hundreds of years of decadence. But the fullness of God's grace is incomplete at this stage. The Old Testament Law showed the need for grace because no one could follow the law perfectly. Yet the Law extended only limited grace. Only certain sins could be forgiven through the sacrificial system. And the grace God extended was primarily for the Jews. Grace was to be shown to outsiders and foreigners, but God's covenantal promises were only for His people. If you read the Old Testament without the light of Jesus, you could argue that God shows grace only to those who merit it. That's what the Pharisees did, and they interpreted the Law in such a way that made them the ones worthy of grace.

Jesus changes all this. In Jesus, the gates to God's Kingdom are thrown wide open. While He ministers to the Jews, He embraces Samaritans and Romans who come to Him looking for hope and healing, shocking everyone, most notably the religious authorities who are quite certain that the promises of God are only for them. As we hear in the best-loved Bible verse of all time, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." In Jesus, God's grace goes global.

But God's grace also redeems the forgotten and the lost and the sinner. We heard the story of Matthew today, who the community hated because he was a tax collector for the reviled Roman government. When Peter first sees the power of Jesus when he is called to be a disciple, he tells Jesus, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the blind and lame and demon-possessed and lepers, all people that society had written off, Jesus befriended. One of the chief criticisms of Jesus was that he spent his time with tax collectors and sinners.

But what Jesus lived out was God's grace. Favor not because you are holy and righteous. Friendship not because you are perfect and worthy. Love not because of your wealth or beauty. Salvation not because you're a good person. Grace is love poured out on the unworthy because that's the nature of who God is, pouring out His affection on the unlovable and the unlikeable, the rejected and discarded, the tired and cold and homeless and addicted and afflicted.

Jesus shows the extent of God's grace in going to the cross for it. In His perfection, dying on the cross, He became the perfect sacrifice that would end the sacrificial system. Through Him, all parts of God's perfect nature were satisfied and sinners can approach God through faith in Jesus. Romans 5:8 shows us the nature of that grace. It says, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Paul explains it again in Ephesians 2. "You were dead in your sins and transgressions...but God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love for us, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved."

The death and resurrection of Jesus for us puts to death once and for all the lie that we have to be good enough or measure up to be accepted into the Kingdom of Heaven. No one is good enough. But God's grace shown to us in Jesus is more than enough. And to receive that grace, all one has to do is to have faith in Jesus, believing and trusting in Jesus and living as His disciple, turning away from our former sin.

Now you might say, “Aha! But works have shown up again! I have to have faith! I have to live as a disciple! Those are works!” But Paul continues in Ephesians 2, telling us, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this faith not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so no one can boast.” We believe we are saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone, and the faith we’ve been given is by God’s grace.

See, it is by God’s grace that any of us have faith at all. We can’t create the perfect situation where we have faith in God. All of us know people who had loving parents, in church every Sunday, read the Bible, and rejected it. All of us know people who had awful upbringings, never spent a moment in church, huge sinners, they come to Jesus. Everyone’s story of faith is different, and most of it was well outside of our hands. Why do we have the faith we do? God’s grace in giving it to us, establishing the events in our lives that we would come to truly believe in Him and the work of His Son Jesus to save us. God plants faith in us and brings it to full growth.

Living as a disciple is not a work so much as it is the natural outgrowth of true faith. The best way I can describe it is through example. You might have seen the movie *The Blind Side* based on the true story of Michael Oher, who went on to be an NFL star and Super Bowl winner. He had a rough childhood and was eventually adopted by the Twohy family. With his obvious football skills, he is courted by all the major colleges looking for talent. When he chooses to go to Ole Miss, the NCAA investigates to see if the Twohy family had unduly influenced his decision. Eventually, he goes back to the investigator and tells her, “I chose Ole Miss because that’s where my family goes to school.” He didn’t go to Ole Miss because he had to or was forced to; no money changed hands. He had become a part of the Twohy family and wanted to do what would please them as part of the family.

In the same way, when we live our lives as disciples – and we’ll talk more about how to do that in the coming weeks – we don’t do it to prove our worth. We don’t try to earn the grace that’s been shown to us, and we don’t change our ways to convince God we’re good. We do it because this is the way our family lives. We’ve been adopted into the family of God, we’ve been shown immense, unmeasurable, unearned grace, and we turn our eyes to godliness and holiness, we turn ourselves toward God’s ways, because this is the way people given the gift of faith live.

And you know what? Grace *is* my favorite. There’s a song we’ve used a few times in the last several months called “Holy Water,” and I know we’ll use it again soon. I absolutely love the bridge. It says simply, “I don’t want to abuse Your grace. God, I need it every day! It’s the only thing that ever really makes me want to change.” That’s so much the truth of the Christian life. We need grace every day. I need to know that, when I lose my temper with someone or linger too long on lustful thoughts or choose to do something that doesn’t please God, I’m not ruined. I can go back to Jesus and He knows and understands and forgives. I need that every day, and so do you. There’s not a day where my old sin nature doesn’t try to get me to sin. R.C. Sproul used to warn that at least in our thoughts, we sin every day before breakfast.

Oh, but that sweet grace! Grace that makes me ready to face another day! Grace that tells me I am loved and accepted by God! Grace that tells me that my sin has been thrown away and buried at the deepest depths of the sea! Grace that teaches me that I matter to God, and that I can lead others to Him, that I can be used by Him, that I am not a failure in His eyes but His beloved son, that you are His beloved daughter! Grace is my favorite!

When we know that grace, we don't want to abuse it. We don't want to take it for granted. As disciples, we don't go around choosing regularly to sin and saying, "Oh, no worries, God will forgive me." That's not how people in the family of God act. We're ashamed of our sin; we come back regularly to receive grace; in as much as it's in our power, we don't sin willfully and deliberately. And we work to fight against those besetting sins, those sins that are hard for us to give up. We fight confident that God is glorified when we fight, and confident that God will eventually release us from the sin nature that we war against. We *want* to change because God's grace makes it possible that we *can* change.

Jesus taught in Luke 7 that the one who is forgiven much loves much...and the one who has been forgiven little, loves little. The point is, all of us have been forgiven so much more than we even know. In the Lord's Prayer, the only phrase that is conditional is our forgiveness. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." God only holds back His grace from those who refuse to show grace to others. How can we possibly refuse to give grace to others when Jesus, the epitome of grace, is the centerpiece and cornerstone of our faith? When Jesus taught the greatest commandments, he said the second was like the first: "Love your neighbor as yourself." You've been shown grace; show grace.

There's probably no better time for this lesson than right now, either. Because 2020 has been a year of sheer insanity, from COVID to politics and everything in-between. And the thing that makes this year harder is that, as Christianity gives way to secularism in our country, grace is dying a quick death. But if you want to stand out as a true Christian, if you want people to see what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, then do this one simple thing: show grace. You've been shown grace; grace is your favorite too; show grace.

But they got my order wrong and overcharged me! Show grace. They voted for a person who thinks the wrong way, acts the wrong way, is bad for the city, bad for the state, bad for the nation! Show grace. They attacked me on social media! Show grace. They wronged me – they deserve my anger! Show grace. Because that's what grace is – undeserved, unearned mercy and kindness. This is the grace Jesus showed when He said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." And it's the grace He showed when He went to the cross, forgiving His enemies even as they crucified Him. When we show grace to those who would persecute us politically, spiritually, personally, it is nothing more than what Christ modeled for us. When we do this, our grace will stand out in a graceless world.

Next week, we'll talk about the spiritual disciplines – the actions Christian disciples take in order to stay close to God. I hope you'll join us for that. But for now, be encouraged and have hope – for our God is a god of grace. May we live in that grace daily and share it with others.