



The Grace Gospel in the Heat/Heart of Church Relationships

Sermon – Greg Holmes – 17 & 24 July - 2 Peter 1:1-11

Introduction

That great American theologian, Al Pacino, once said, “I asked God for a bike, but I know God doesn’t work that way. So I stole a bike and asked for forgiveness.” Pacino’s statement taps into a tension that we all sense intuitively but maybe have not expressed explicitly.

If God is forgiving, then why strive for a holy life? If the penalty has been paid, then why must progress be made?

God’s grace, as we have seen in Galatians, is given freely as the gift of salvation and continues to be given as we seek to live for him. But what precisely is grace and how do we live it out? This is the thrust of the new, short series of sermons we begin today. And it is these two topics - What is grace? and How do I live it out? (specifically in the context of our Christian relationships) - that I want to address today.

Body

First let us consider... **WHAT IS GRACE?**

One article I read was entitled ‘Grace is not a Thing’; the writer’s point was that it is not a thing but rather it is an action. In Christian terms it is a bit like ‘love’ which is not a thing (a gooey feeling in the tummy) but positive action towards another.

Grace in action is one of the attributes of God. It is a communicable attribute – something of God that we are able to emulate and are expected to emulate. We can’t be omniscient (all knowing), omnipotent (all powerful) or omnipresent (present everywhere) as God is. But we can be gracious as God is.

Grace, in the first place, is God’s undeserved favour. With a little help from my friends (the other preachers in this series) I have put together a (GWH) definition of grace:

Grace is the act of bestowing unmerited favour – of accounting something good and helpful and wholesome - to a person who has not done anything to deserve it.

Jerry Bridges defines it like this: *Grace is God's favor through Christ to people who deserve his wrath.*

It is best seen in the action of God (Yahweh) in bestowing salvation as a free gift (unmerited) on those who deserve his wrath and then God's continuing gracious action in conforming those who trust in that grace through Jesus to the image of his Son.



I saw this walking down the street one day in Kiama - Grace: Always More – parked outside the Kiama Law courts. And indeed Grace is always more And more ... and more. God does not run out of grace; he continually gives it to us.

To keep it short... **Grace is free unmerited favour.**

With that said we can embrace the catch-phase...

God's Riches At Christ's Expense

This is what God is like. From his earliest interactions with humans, he has been gracious. In the Garden after the 'Apple' incident he provides clothing for Adam and Eve, who now perceive they are naked and need to cover themselves up. That is grace – free unmerited favour.

At the time of the Flood, though all mankind is wicked, God chooses to save one family (Noah and co) to continue his work on earth. That is grace – free unmerited favour.

After the Tower of Babel Incident, God chooses one family - Abraham's - to whom he makes promises of Land, Descendants and Blessing (eventually to the whole world). That is grace – free unmerited favour.

He rescues his people through Moses from Egypt even though they seem to have all but forgotten him. That is grace – free unmerited favour.

He reveals himself to Moses (and us) as...

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6-7)

And so on through the Old Testament – free unmerited favour to his servants and his people.

Then we come to Jesus – the ultimate demonstration of Grace.

Here there is the fundamental affirmation that the whole of salvation rests on God's initiative, that the single source of salvation is God, and that God's salvific purpose comes to expression in the one event of grace, the redemptive act of Jesus Christ. (DictBibTh)

In Paul's writings this emphasis comes to sharpest expression in Ephesians 2:8–9:

⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith —and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

Jesus came to us full of grace and truth. He lived a perfect life and, in a totally unimaginable act of grace, died, not for his own sins but for yours and mine. He rose from the dead and lives to reign in heaven and rain down grace on us as we turn to him.

Most poignantly Jesus illustrated this grace in the Parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15v11ff). We have the Father's free unmerited favour.

Grace is not a thing. Grace is not stuff that God gives us apart from himself. He doesn't run out of it. God gives us himself when we don't deserve it; that is grace. The oft-repeated definition of grace as an undeserved gift is right but does not go far enough when referring to the grace of God. Grace is a gift, but God is not only the giver, he himself is the gift. God graces us with himself. (Jeremy Treat)

And it is through this grace that we come to be in right relationship to God. We didn't earn it; we can't earn more of it; we don't need to confirm or appropriate or even grasp hold of the grace - is it a free, unmerited gift to the undeserving.

However, the appropriate response then is to live in conformity to Christ - a thankful obedient life in service of God.

As Aiden reminded us last week – “Theology has consequences...”

So we come to the second part of this talk...

HOW DO I LIVE IT OUT?

And, specifically, how do we live it out in the HEAT of Church Relationships.

Let me explain what I mean by that.

You don't have to read far into the literature about churches before you see that in many, many cases church relationships can be fractious, factional, unhelpful, hurtful and sometimes down right damaging. That is what I mean by heat. We have known that in our own Church and I am sure many of you will know of it in many other churches. It is sobering and disappointing but should not be totally surprising; many of the New Testament letters were written to address various sort of problems in churches. For churches are a collection of sinners – forgiven sinners – but still sinners.

The family and I were looking up collective nouns for animals during the week – you know ‘a murder of crows’; a ‘flamboyance of flamingoes’; a ‘tower of giraffes’ and ‘a *congregation* of alligators’! Sometimes churches can seem like that.

That may be true but a vast amount of the epistles exhort us to right relationships with one another.

Note Philippians 2

1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in

spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. 5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus...

In a discussion last week, a brother from KAC said that one of the keys to Christian relationships is that we have Jesus and a relationship with him in common. Too often, and this is part of our continued sinfulness, we get to the point of recognising someone as a Christian and then we focus on our differences - denomination, worship styles, music preferences, doctrinal and church practice issues, personal lifestyle issues – instead of focusing on the one great thing we have in common and building the relationship on that. This is not compromise! We can be firm in our beliefs and opinions but we can also act in grace to one another.

How do we do this? I want to turn to 2 Peter 1:1-11.

(In what I have to say I am indebted to a sermon I heard from Ross Lester via The Gospel Coalition's website).

How should we relate to one another and how do we do it?

The two key words here are Love and Grace and we need to grow in both. We will concentrate on Grace – [God's] free unmerited favour.

I want to use Ross Lester's three headings here to look at this passage.

Growing in Grace requires:

God's power v3

Our Effort v5

Much Grace v10

But first note the reminder of God's gracious salvation in Peter's opening words:

1 Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours:

2 Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

These are people who have received the GIFT of salvation – their faith was given to them ‘through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ.’ And it is indeed precious

Growing in Grace requires God’s power v3

3 His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

The grace that gets me in is the grace that moves me forward.

As we saw from Galatians the key to living to be like Jesus is to get to know Jesus better. We do this by meeting him in his Word... certainly in the Gospels but also in the whole of Scripture.

The more you know Jesus, the more you grow in Jesus. Indeed, the more you understand the grace of God in your life, the more you grow in that grace. Unless we actually do this, we slide back into our old sinful ways. To be like him, focus on being with him

Growing in Grace requires Effort v5

5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

Not adding works to grace... rather now we make the effort to fill out the fullness of that grace. God saves you by grace and provides the

grace for you to grow in that salvation.

Philippians 2:12-13 - Work OUT your own salvation.

12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

Work OUT your own salvation. Note it is not just a matter of grabbing your bootstraps and dragging yourself out of the mud; it requires effort... work... but it is work with the strength provided by God's good grace – his gift of strength.

Growing in Grace require much Grace v10

10 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, 11 and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Confirm your calling – grace. Our election and calling is a work of God's grace... his undeserved gift.

And grace has its outcome in Jesus' eternal kingdom... now and into the limitless future.

Conclusion

Not surprisingly, that American actor cum theologian, Al Pacino, was mostly wrong in what he said about God's relationship to us.

We can't just do what we like and then ask forgiveness.

God's grace is given freely, but it also enables and invites human response, so that people are called to behave towards God with worship, gratitude and obedience; and towards one another in ways that reflect and broadcast the graciousness of God. Dict BibTh

God's gracious action toward us is unmerited and undeserved and should bring forth in us...

Firstly, an attitude of thankfulness which issues in loving obedience to our Lord.

Secondly it works out in our gracious dealings with others... particularly in our relationships with one another in our congregations. People will always have their differences in regard to a vast array of things: Music, worship styles, dress, women's ministry, how we respond to gender issues, the environment, politics, preaching styles, suffering, evangelism etc. etc. etc. And those differences may lead us to disagree, even argue. But in all of that we are called to act with grace.

So the next time you need to respond to a fellow Christian on some issue (and it may be right that you need to correct and teach that person) always ask yourself...

Is this a gracious way to deal with this?

Am I dealing with this person and this issue in the way that God and Jesus have dealt with me?

And try to do it --- before you react.

I guess in summary my point is that, when we act in grace toward one another (and this is a bit 'cute') we change the HEAT of Christian Relationships to ... the HEART of Christian Relationships.

And grace should always be at the HEART of our relationships, no matter with whom... because it is at the heart of our relationship with Jesus.

And so to pick up a couple of verse/points from Aiden's sermon last week:

Galatians 6: ² Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

⁹ Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

We certainly need God's grace to do that.

So we should pray for God's ongoing grace in our lives.