

18 November 2007

What's So *Offensive* About Grace?

Reading: Luke 18:9-14

On April 28th 1999, in Taber, Alberta, 17-year-old Jason Lang was killed in a copycat Columbine style shooting. His father, Dale Lang is an Anglican minister. Dale Lang's immediate and unconditional forgiveness of the 14-year-old boy who shot and killed his son has amazed many, including some hardened skeptics. By praying that God would bless the boy who shot his son and his family, he exemplified the gospel he proclaims.

When people have asked him how he has responded so gracefully to the tragedy, he freely acknowledges, "If it wasn't for the grace of God in my life, I think I would be a very angry man."

The most distinctive thing about Christianity is its emphasis on the grace of God. God is described as "the God of all grace" (1 Pet 5:10). Paul tells us that "it is by grace that (we) have been saved through faith--and this is not from (ourselves), it is the gift of God--not by works so that no one can boast" (Eph 2:8, 9). But there is a great deal of fuzzy thinking about grace. Since this concept is central to all we say and do, it is important that we know exactly what we are talking about.

Probably the easiest way to describe grace is to compare it with justice and with mercy. **Justice is when we get what we deserve; mercy is when we *don't* get what we deserve; and grace is when we get what we *don't* deserve.**

Let me unpack this. Suppose I have a teenage son (all things are possible – remember Abraham). Academically he is bright and he excels at sport. But one particular student cannot stand him and does everything he can to make my son's life a misery. One day, this guy and several of his friends ambush my son on his way home from school. They swarm him, beat him up and kick him to death. This is all quite intentional. He does not collect a random bullet, nor is the gang surprised when he stops breathing. They drag his lifeless body into the bushes and dump it there.

Eventually they are rounded up and face trial. Justice has to take its course. This kind of behavior cannot be condoned. But what is *my* attitude towards the young man who planned the whole thing and delivered the fatal blow. I may be filled with anger and desire vengeance. I may go into stoic mode and dispassionately insist on justice. I insulate myself against emotional involvement and simply insist that he get what he deserves. I cannot interfere with the judicial process, nor should I. But I don't want to see him suffer. He has taken a life and he deserves to spend his life in prison. That would be *justice*. He would be getting *what he deserves*.

But, at least as far as my attitude goes, I may wish to extend mercy to him. I may wish to see him pardoned or at least shown some measure of clemency, so that he does not serve a life sentence even if he thoroughly deserves to do so. **Justice is getting what we deserve; mercy is *not* getting what we deserve.**

But grace even tops mercy. Suppose, while he is serving his shortened sentence, I visit him in prison, show love to him, bring him gifts on his birthday and do all I can to make his stay more tolerable. Suppose I take the money I had saved up for my son's university education, and make it available to him for his education. Suppose I ultimately adopt him as my son. That's grace. **If justice is giving us the penalty we deserve, and mercy is *not* giving us the penalty we deserve, grace is showing favor that is the opposite of what we deserve.**

That, of course, is what Paul means when he says, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:7, 8)

John Newton captured something of the wonder of God's grace in the song we sang a little earlier: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound." Philip Yancey explores the concept in his excellent book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*¹ If we cannot qualify the word 'grace' with the adjective 'amazing,' we are no longer talking about grace. When grace ceases to be amazing, it ceases to be grace. It is of the very essence of grace that the person extending that grace is under no obligation whatsoever to do so!

That's why my title this morning seems odd, to say the least. We are asking, "What's so *offensive* about grace?" How can anyone possibly find grace offensive? In answering that question, we shall go right to the heart of the good news about God and the salvation he brings us. First let's see how the parable Jesus told helps to clarify our subject.

I. JESUS TOLD A STORY THAT WOULD CERTAINLY HAVE OFFENDED MANY OF HIS HEARERS

A. We can easily miss the point of this parable.

1. Luke's comment "gives the game away"

In the first place Luke's comment at the beginning of the parable "gives the game away." He introduces it with the observation, "To some who were confident in their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable." It certainly helps us to know what the parable is about, but we must remember that Jesus did not preface the parable with this remark. He started with the statement, "Two men went up to the temple to pray. . ."

¹ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997).

2. Pharisees are good and tax collectors bad

In the second place, the wisdom of hindsight prevents us from hearing the parable as Jesus' initial audience heard it. We have a negative view of the Pharisees, because they opposed Jesus and he condemned their hypocrisy. Because Jesus associated with tax collectors, our view of them is more positive than it should be.

Craig Blomberg reminds us that "in Jesus' world, the Pharisees were the most popular group of Jewish leaders. They were widely admired by the ordinary farmers and fishermen, the so-called people of the land."² They attempted to contextualize the law so that the people could be obedient to God in every situation. They believed that if God's people were obedient, God's blessing would rest upon the nation and that this would rid the land of Gentile (Roman) domination.

The average Jew hated the tax collectors. They had sold out to the enemy in order to line their own pockets. No one was forced to accept this dubious form of employment, but these 'up-and-outs' used their education and influence to exploit their compatriots. They are repeatedly lumped together with "sinners" (Mark 2:15-16; Luke 15:1).

We tend to have things the other way round, but it's important to remember that, to Jesus' audience, the Pharisees were admired and respected while the tax collectors were despised and stigmatized.

B. The story as Jesus told it

1. The daily service of public worship

There was a *daily* service of public worship in the temple. Anyone going up to the temple for corporate prayers would be participating in the atonement sacrifice (the *daily* service in the temple). A lamb would be sacrificed for the sins of the people. The time of incense that followed this was especially appropriate as a time of personal prayer. The worshippers knew that it was possible for them to approach God with their personal needs *only* because the atonement sacrifice had already taken place.

2. Jesus focused attention on two of the worshippers

Jesus focused attention on two of the worshippers, a Pharisee and a tax collector. That would certainly have captured the attention of the crowd. Obviously he is going

² Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 159.

to highlight the contrast between them. The righteous Pharisee would be heard and the presumptuous tax collector ignored. He had no right to be there.

3. “The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed”³

It is not difficult to understand why he did so. He regarded himself as righteous and despised others. In fact, the Pharisees described their less religious compatriots disdainfully as *am-ha'aretz* (“people of the land”). One could be contaminated by coming into contact with one of the *am-ha'aretz*.⁴ So, in a gesture of superiority, he stands aloof from the bulk of the worshippers. It was usual to pray aloud. In Jewish piety, prayer consists primarily of thanking God for his gifts. This man ostensibly thanks God, but in reality he merely congratulates himself for being a cut above others. In his line of sight is the worst possible example of the *am-ha'aretz*, a tax-collector. That may have prompted his reference to robbers (rogues), evildoers (swindlers) and adulterers. The particular list of undesirable characteristics applies specifically to the tax collector and the object lesson is standing right in his line of vision.

His selection of two of his virtues is significant. He was not required by the law of God to fast as often as twice a week (Lev 25:29; Num 39:7). So, he prides himself on the fact that he goes way beyond the requirements of the law. He is obliged to tithe only on grain, wine and oil (Lev 27:30; Num 18:27). But this man tithed *on everything* (cf. Mt 23:23). He had built up an impressive list of spiritual credits, that is, if things work that way!

4. The tax collector

The camera swings across the temple court and the contrast is sharp. Into our vision comes the tax collector. He too is standing away from the throng. But he is not standing *aloof*; he is standing *at a distance*. The accepted prayer posture was to have one's hands crossed over one's chest. Men did not beat upon their chests except in times of extreme anguish or intense anger. In the whole of Scripture, the gesture described here is mentioned only twice: here and in Luke 23:48, “When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place (at the crucifixion), they beat their breasts and went away.”

The tax collector felt so unworthy that he wouldn't so much as look up to heaven. All he could say was, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The usual (Greek) term for

³ Here, I think the TNIV translation is preferable to the NIV translation, which reads: “The Pharisee stood up and prayed *about* himself.” Either translation is possible. We know that the Pharisee *did* pray about himself, but it seems more likely that the Lord is drawing attention to the fact that he purposely stood aloof from the other worshippers. Hence, “The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed.”

⁴ For Pharisees, even contact with the clothing of the *am-ha'aretz* could count as uncleanness. Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes, Hagigah 2:7* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 214.

mercy is used by a blind man later in the chapter: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Luke 18:38) Here, another (Greek) word is used. It is a word that can certainly be translated “mercy,” but refers more particularly to the atonement.⁵ The tax collector is doing more than offering a generalized prayer for mercy. Here, Kenneth Bailey describes his prayer:

One can almost smell the pungent incense, hear the loud clash of cymbals, and see the great cloud of dense smoke rising from the burnt offering. The tax collector is there. He stands afar off, anxious not to be seen, sensing his unworthiness to stand with the participants. In brokenness he longs to be part of it all. He yearns that he might stand with “the righteous.” In deep remorse he strikes his chest and cries out in repentance and hope, “O God! Let it be for me! Make an atonement for me, a sinner!” There in the temple this humble man, aware of his own sin and unworthiness, with no merit of his own to commend him, longs that the great dramatic atonement sacrifice might apply to him.⁶

5. The service is over

But the order is inverted. The Pharisee was mentioned first in the parable. But as they go down from the temple to their respective homes, it is the tax collector who is mentioned first. He, rather than the other, goes home justified before God. The concluding comment is not a general statement about humility and exaltation. In the context of this parable, it homes in on our relationship to God. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

That’s all Jesus says. But we have to realize that if this gift of grace or undeserved favor was available to the tax collector, it was available to the Pharisee as well. He too could have gone to his home justified before God.

This clear teaching about God’s grace should fill us with wonder and gratitude. But, strange as it may seem, *many people have found grace to be offensive.*

II YOU MAY EVEN FIND GRACE TO BE OFFENSIVE

Many did in Jesus’ day. Some, who regarded themselves as upstanding members of Christian churches in the first century, did! In fact, as time went on, an elaborate system was devised to make salvation the result of human merit. Jesus was even brought into that system and so

⁵ Atonement refers to a sacrifice on the basis of which God declares a guilty person justified. The word is used twice as a verb (here and in Heb 2:17) and four times as a noun (Rom 3:25; Heb 9:5; 1 John 2:2; 4:10).

⁶ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Combined Ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976 and 1980), 154.

was the cross. But, at the end of the day, it was all about requirements and procedures, merits and demerits, penance and payment.

Why is it that so many people find grace unpalatable? Let me suggest four related reasons:

A. It implies that we are in desperate need.

The term “sinners” is not in vogue, but that’s the term the Bible uses. We fail to meet the standard God requires; we transgress his laws; we break his heart and we hurt one another.

B. It declares that we can do nothing to alter our condition.

1. We cannot pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.
2. We can never, ever claim that we earned our salvation or worked our way to heaven.
3. We cannot boast in any way. From all that the Pharisee said, the atoning sacrifice might as well not have taken place. The accent is on what he does, not on what God has done for him.

C. It renders religion, as such, worse than useless.

1. Pious thoughts and sanctimonious acts, in themselves, can be meaningless or even enslaving.
2. We all know that people can sometimes be worse when they are religious than when they are irreligious.
 - (a) This does not only apply to Al Qaeda.
 - (b) It was the religious establishment that organized Jesus’ death.
 - (c) C S Lewis made the point that those most likely to die for a cause are also most likely to kill for it.
 - (d) And (dare I say it?) I have seen merciless character assassination and sometimes skullduggery, all supposedly for the sake of ‘the truth’. In the name of ‘truth’, we can deny the truth of which Jesus spoke!

D. It claims your whole life, not merely some specified duties.

1. It's all about relationship. It is and it always was. You can have religion without grace, but you cannot have a relationship with God other than by his grace.
2. In Israel, a person who got into serious debt could repay that debt by becoming a slave. But he was to serve for no more than six years. "In the seventh year, he (could) go free, without paying anything." What's more, his master was not to send him away empty-handed. He was to give him a fresh start by supplying him liberally from the flock, the threshing floor and winepress. But, it sometimes happened that such a good relationship had developed between the master and the slave that the slave did not want to leave him. Then the slave would declare, "I love my master . . . and I do not want to go free." The master would then take him before the judges. There in the sight of the judges, he would pierce the slave's ear with an awl and the slave would become his slave for life (Ex 21:2-6; Deut 15:12-17).

Interestingly, Paul loved to call himself a *doulos* – a bond slave of Jesus Christ.

3. One of the great books of the 20th century was *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In that book he contrasts what he calls "cheap grace" with "costly grace." Listen to what he says about this costly grace:

Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is *costly* because it costs a man his life, and it is *grace* because it gives a man the only true life. It is *costly* because it condemns sin, and *grace* because it justifies the sinner. Above all it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: *ye were bought at a price*, and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.⁷

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a true story that encapsulates this principle. It's about a friendship between an American missionary to India by the name of David Morse and a pearl diver by the name of Rambhau. They became good friends and good friends discuss what is mutually important. They openly spoke about their respective religious convictions. Although Rambhau appreciated Morse's friendship and respected him greatly, he simply could not accept the concept of grace as Morse explained it.

One day he invited Morse to his home and took out a safe deposit box. He then explained that he was about to set out on a pilgrimage to Delhi, some fourteen hundred kilometers away--on foot! He opened the strongbox and told Morse what he had never before shared with him. He'd

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959), 37.

had a son who had followed in his footsteps and become a pearl diver. But one day, in finding the finest pearl of his career, he lost his life. Rambhau had treasured that pearl more than anything on earth. But now he was about to set out on a journey from which he may never return and, with a spontaneity and generosity so typical of Indians, he wanted his friend to have it.

Morse was touched. But he had a thought. It was a magnificent pearl, so he offered Rambhau ten thousand dollars for it. “No!” said an offended Rambhau, “you cannot have this pearl for ten thousand dollars.” “I’m sorry,” said Morse, “I’ll give you fifteen thousand for it.” Now deeply hurt, Rambhau protested, “You don’t understand, you can’t *buy* this pearl; it is invaluable. It cost the life of my son. You can only receive it as a gift!” As he spoke those words the truth of what Morse had shared with him dawned. He understood “costly grace.” As Bonhoeffer said:

Above all it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: *ye were bought at a price*, and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us.