

STORIES THAT PACK A PUNCH

Study 10

What's So *Offensive* About Grace?

(Luke 18:9-14)

Philip Yancey wrote an excellent book entitled, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* For his trouble, he received some angry criticism from Christians, who were offended by his radical portrayal of God's grace. That's largely because many have a watered down concept of grace as a general (somewhat fuzzy) reference to God's kindness. Others think of it as a spiritual fluid that is somehow infused into us when we do religious things in the prescribed way. In reality, *grace is undeserved favour*. If *justice* means that we (as sinners) get what we deserve, and *mercy* means that we *don't* get what we deserve, *grace* means we are actually given what we *don't deserve*. But definitions don't really do grace justice. Yancey acknowledges this and suggests that "grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more . . . and nothing we can do to make God love us less . . . It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God's family"¹

Instead of using the usual title of the parable (The Pharisee and the Tax Collector), I have entitled this study, "What's so *Offensive* about Grace?" The reason will become apparent as we study it.

WHAT?

1. Feeling the Force of the Parable

There are several factors that prevent us, as Western readers, from feeling the full force of this parable.

- Luke's comment at the beginning of the parable "gives the game away." 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 D. Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 70-71.

- As Westerners, we tend to think of these two men heading to the temple for their private devotions. It is far more likely that they were part of a public worship service. Both offer personal prayers, but they do so during a public service.²
- The circumstantial evidence leads us to the conclusion that their private prayers were offered "as a part of the corporate worship during the atonement sacrifice ritual held twice daily."³ This fact makes their respective prayers particularly significant.
- 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."⁴ 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 illegitimate 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.

² There are several reasons why the setting for this parable is a likely to be a public service: 1) The temple, as the place of public worship, is specifically mentioned. 2) The two men go up to the temple and go down from the temple at the same time. 3) When Middle Easterners say, "I am going to the mosque/church to pray," they usually mean they are going to corporate worship. 4) The fact that the Pharisee "stood by himself" and the tax collector "stood afar off" indicates that others were present. Both stood apart from the other worshippers, but for very different reasons. 5) As we shall see, the tax collector specifically mentions the atonement in his prayer.

³ 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), 146.

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 159.

2. The Parable

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.

Jesus focussed 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 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.

"The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed."⁵ 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*.⁶ So, in a gesture of superiority, he stands aloof from the bulk of the worshippers. It was usual to pray aloud. Possibly his prayer is also a way of instructing (or getting at) the unrighteous who overhear it. 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!

⁵ 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."

⁶ 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.

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 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.⁷ 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.⁸

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).

⁷ 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).

⁸ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 154.

3. What Is So Offensive about Grace?

There is a little acrostic for grace that describes it as **God's Riches At Christ's Expense**. That may sound a little trite, but in a way it does convey the general idea. We could pile up verses here. Three will do:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor 8:9).

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph 2:8-10).

And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace (Rom 11:6).

Grace, as it is presented in the Bible, does not mean that God turns a blind eye to our sin or that he is indulgent. But he is described as "the God of all grace" (1 Pet 5:10). He wants to bestow favour on his worst enemy. To do so (and remain just) he has gone to the most incredible lengths (that's what the incarnation and the crucifixion are all about). All of this so that he may treat us as though we had never sinned and lavish the riches of his grace on us. What could possibly be better than that?

Yet some do find grace offensive. Paul also spoke about "the offence of the cross" (Gal 5:11). What is it about grace that so many people don't like? I would suggest the following:

- It implies that we are sinners under the just sentence of death.
- It cannot co-exist with any idea of human merit as a contributor to salvation and therefore assails human pride.
- It renders religion, *as such*, worse than useless.
- It claims your whole life, not merely some specified duties

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer contrasts what he described as "cheap grace" and "costly grace." Cheap grace is actually a caricature (and an oxymoron). Our focus is on what Bonhoeffer calls costly grace.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him . . .

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.⁹

SO WHAT?

1. What hinders us from hearing the parable as Jesus' original audience heard it?
2. Can you think of some parallels in today's world? Who would be more or less equivalent to the tax collector and who would be represented by the Pharisee? Careful!
3. What was the Pharisee's most fundamental error?

Pride	Self-righteousness	A wrong idea about salvation	Despising others	Boastfulness
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NOW WHAT?

1. Have you ever prayed a prayer something like that of the tax collector?
2. Do you think it is possible and necessary to add your own effort to the grace of God in order to complete your salvation or at least to hold on to it?
3. Complete the sentence: "While I was still God's enemy, Christ died for me (Rom 5:8, 10); in consequence I . . ."

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959), 37.