

Some Thoughts on Grace

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Readings: Matthew 20:1-16 and 2 Samuel 9

Grace is a difficult concept for human beings to wrap our minds around. We are much more used to the human idea that you have to give something to get something. The entire capitalist system is based on the idea of exchange. We say "there is no such thing as a free lunch". We sometimes imagine and act as if we can earn our way into the kingdom by good works.

Yet when we think about this, we begin to see how ridiculous it sounds. There are many people who think that they will be rewarded for doing something that they were supposed to be doing anyways. Jesus says

(Luke 17:10)

So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'

The gift of eternal life, of relationship with God and with Christ, this is not something we can earn. Even if we were to lead perfect lives, this would not give us any right to go up to our Creator and demand that he give us eternal life. He would have every right to say to us, "Good, you were only doing what you were supposed to do".

All good gifts that come from God, come because we are his sons and daughters, because we have chosen to respond to his love, extended to humanity through his Son, Jesus Christ. In short because we have a relationship with, and we continue in that relationship. Paul says

(Romans 8:14-18)

because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

God's love is extended to us from out of his grace. Everything good in your life is a gift from God to his son or daughter. Jesus speaks of this relationship when he says.

(Matthew 7:9-12)

Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?

Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?

If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

He continues on to say:

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this

sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Obedience is required of us if we are to be disciples of Christ. Jesus says "If you love me, you WILL keep my commandments". But, obedience is not a coinage to be used to pay our way into the Kingdom. Doing so cheapens the relationship between ourselves and God and his son, and turns it into a commercial one.

Jesus knew that grace is a difficult concept for us to understand. Which is why he told parables. Jesus knew the power of stories to convey ideas, to teach.

(Matthew 20:1-16)

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.

He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing.

He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.'

So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing.

About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius.

So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.

When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.

'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of

the day.'

"But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'"

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

One of the most striking stories he told was about a vineyard owner who needed workers. The vines were bursting with grapes, and if he didn't get them in soon, they would rot on the vines and become worthless. So we read in Matthew that he went out early in the morning to the town square and hired some workers. They were to be payed a denarius, a typical days wages in those times.

A few hours later he gets a little nervous. There are alot of grapes here, and he's not quite sure he's going to be able to get them all. So he goes again into the marketplace and finds some workers who haven't been hired so far. He tells them to go and work in the vineyard. "I'll do right by you" he says. He isn't thinking about money right now, he wants to get those grapes in and soon. The workers shrug and go off to work. They are glad. They were beginning to wonder if they were going to get any work today. They'll get something at the end of the day. Maybe dinner will be a little smaller than normal, but off they go, thankful to be working.

A few hours later, he scratches his head as he looks at the rows of grapes that are still hanging from their vines. The crops have been good this year, and they aren't even half done at noon. So he scurries to the marketplace and finds another group standing by. He sends them off to the vineyard. At three o'clock, he again thinks he should get some more workers. At the marketplace he's happy to see some still standing around. Off they go to the vineyards.

It's five o'clock and getting close to the end of the day, and our vineyard owner thinks to himself "I'll just check one more time, to see if maybe I can get a few more people, so we can finish up today". But he is still surprised when he goes to the marketplace, and sees that there are still some workers left. He asks them "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?". They reply "Because no one has hired us". So off they go to the vineyard.

It's clear from what the owner of the vineyard says that these workers had been waiting all day to get hired. These were not "johnny-come-lately's" or folks who had slept in late and decided to wander down to see if maybe they could put in an hour or two someplace, just to keep their hand in it, so to speak. These were labourers whose families depended on their labour for food. Their hearts must have sank as they day passed and they were passed over. There would not be much joy at the dinner table that night. So when they were hired at the last hour, they must have been somewhat glad. They would work a little bit, and get a little bit, enough to buy a little food, so they wouldn't have to go home completely empty-handed.

But they were ready to work. They weren't asleep, or off in the fields watching the clouds go by. They were ready to work long hours in the hot sun.

So not much later all the workers assemble to get their pay. Imagine, if you will, the joy on the faces of the workers who were hired later, when they look in their pay envelopes, and find, not a fraction of a day's wages, but an entire day's wages. Their eyes grow wide. This is much better than they expected. Now they and their families can have enough to eat that night. They might even have a little left over for all the other things that growing families seem to need.

That, brothers and sisters and friends, is what grace is about. It is about that joy that we should have when we realise that God has blessed us far beyond what we deserve. In this parable, the vineyard owner represents God. God has work that needs to be done. There is a harvest for us to bring in.

Let's not make a mistake: being a follower of Christ is hard work. Christianity is not for cowards or slackers or lazy persons. Christianity is about choosing the harder way because it is the better way.

But what we find in this parable is an important lesson: God gives us what we need, and more, not what we deserve. Grace, as I've said before, is blessings that we do not merit. How much more we can glorify God when we realise that what he has given us, and will give us, he gives to us out of love, not because we have earned it. Those workers understood grace, they understood the joy that it can bring. Do we consider God's grace to us often enough? Does it make us as joyful as these workers must have been? Do we secretly believe that we have actually earned that money, that it really wasn't a gift?

Let us also not be like the workers who had worked all day, and were put out that others who had not "borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day" were to be paid the same as they were. The vineyard owner, who represents God, has an answer for them:

"Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

If you believe that you have earned what God gives you, then you will always be envious of someone who appears to have more, and to have done less. This is the beginning of sinful envy.

"It is my money." This is the whole point of the parable. It is God's money to do what he wants with. If he chooses to grace people that we do not think deserve it, then that is his right to do with his creation what he pleases. We must remember always that we are the potter and he is the clay.

(2 Samuel 9)

David asked, "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can

show kindness for Jonathan's sake?"

Now there was a servant of Saul's household named Ziba. They called him to appear before David, and the king said to him, "Are you Ziba?" "Your servant," he replied.

The king asked, "Is there no one still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show God's kindness?" Ziba answered the king, "There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in both feet."

"Where is he?" the king asked. Ziba answered, "He is at the house of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar."

So King David had him brought from Lo Debar, from the house of Makir son of Ammiel.

When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, came to David, he bowed down to pay him honor. David said, "Mephibosheth!" "Your servant," he replied.

"Don't be afraid," David said to him, "for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table."

Mephibosheth bowed down and said, "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?"

Then the king summoned Ziba, Saul's servant, and said to him, "I have given your master's grandson everything that belonged to Saul and his family.

You and your sons and your servants are to farm the land for him and bring in the crops, so that your master's grandson may be provided for. And Mephibosheth, grandson of your master, will always eat at my table." (Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.)

Then Ziba said to the king, "Your servant will do whatever my lord the king commands his servant to do." So Mephibosheth ate at David's table like one of the king's sons.

Mephibosheth had a young son named Mica, and all the members of Ziba's household were servants of Mephibosheth.

And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king's table, and he was crippled in both feet.

We know when he was young, David had a good friend named Jonathan. David and Jonathan were what we might now call "best friends", they were very close. In fact the scriptures say that

(1 Samuel 18:1-4)

After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself ...And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

As in many stories of friendship there is a complication. Jonathan is the son of Saul, the King of Israel. Saul was not a well man. The scriptures say that the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him, he had a mental illness, probably what we would now call psychotic paranoia mixed with depression. But this was sent by God to torment Saul, perhaps to prod him into repenting, to puncture his pride.

Saul hated David. David had been successful in war and captured the hearts of a nation. We get an example of this in 1 Samuel 18:8-10, when David is returning from killing Goliath: The maidens danced, and

As they danced, they sang: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands."

Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?"

And from that time on, Saul kept a jealous eye on David.

. Saul had tried to kill David, and David wondered if it was time to leave, to escape before Saul was successful in his assassination attempts. David had asked Jonathan to go to Saul and find out if Saul was still trying to kill him. Jonathan returns with the bad news. In what must be one of the most tragic scenes in scripture, David and Jonathan part, never to meet again.

(1 Samuel 20: 41-42)

.... David got up from the south side of the stone and bowed down before Jonathan three times, with his face to the ground. Then they kissed each other and wept together--but David wept the most.

Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD, saying, 'The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.'" Then David left, and Jonathan went back to the town.

David lives the life of a guerrilla warrior, on the run, with a band of outcasts. He tries to reconcile with Saul by his dramatic action at the Cave of Macpela, but in the end it doesn't work out. David is forced to take refuge with the enemies of his people, the Philistines.

We later learn that Jonathan and his father Saul are killed on the field of battle. David ascends to the throne and civil war erupts between the house of David and the House of Saul. Years pass and David consolidates his nation and even expands into neighbouring lands. But after a while things settle down, and he remembers his friend Jonathan. He missed Jonathan, and grieves that he is gone. One day he asks:

Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?

A servant named Ziba answers:

There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in both feet.

But David demands that this son of Jonathan, who is named Mephibosheth be brought to him. Now we can imagine Mephibosheth's terror when he is brought before David. He fully expects to be executed. That was the custom at the time when one dynasty replaced another. All members of the previous dynasty were put to death.

But instead Mephibosheth finds that he is to be seated at the kings table, to be, in essence, adopted as one of the kings sons. This is truly an example of grace, of unmerited favour. Mephibosheth did nothing to deserve such treatment, in fact, by the traditions of the time, he was a walking dead man. Yet, because of an accident of fate, by his relationship with Jonathan, instead he was provided with a place at the Kings table, with what he and his family needed to live well.

We know that David was a man after God's own heart. He was a man who was close to God, who understood his God well. So we see him here doing a very God-like thing. He extends grace to Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth did nothing to deserve this blessing. Merely by his relationship to Jonathan, someone he may never have met, were all these blessing bestowed upon him.

In this historical incident, David represents God, the one who extends grace. Jesus is represented by Jonathan. And we are represented by Mephibosheth. It is only through our relationship with Christ that we can have God's grace. David's kindness towards Mephibosheth is because of his love for Jonathan. God's kindness towards us is because of his love for Christ. When we accept Christ, when we are baptised into Christ, we become related to Christ. God looks at us with the favour that he looks at Christ with.

The analogy continues. We know something about Mephibosheth because he is mentioned earlier in Samuel, in a footnote, so to speak:

2 Samuel 4:4

(Jonathan son of Saul had a son who was lame in both feet. He was five years

old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. His nurse picked him up and fled, but as she hurried to leave, he fell and became crippled. His name was Mephibosheth.)

Mephibosheth was lame from birth, he had suffered a fall and became crippled. This too describes us. We also are lame, handicapped. We know that in the Mosaic law, someone who was lame or otherwise handicapped could not serve as a priest. This is not because God is somehow prejudiced against the handicapped, but because he wanted to make a point. Before you can think about approaching God, you had better be perfect. In this sense the Law was a schoolteacher, because we recognise that none of us has this necessary perfection. Perfection in form is perhaps possible, but not in the kind of purity and holiness that is required before we can approach God on our own. All of us must depend upon the righteousness of Christ.

Furthermore, we read that Mephibosheth was living in a place called Lo Debar before David summoned him. "Lo Debar" when translated from Hebrew means "barren, desolate". God has rescued us also from a place of barrenness and desolation, which is our own sin and brokenness.

The analogy here is not perfect, and is not complete, but I think we can begin to get the picture. We do not deserve the kindness and love that God has shown towards us. God loves us, in spite of what we are and what we do to hurt him. He loves us because he is far better than us. We love the loveable, that is easy to do. What we must learn as followers of Christ is to love the unloveable, to love when it is not convenient for us. Paul tells us that we are "sons and daughters of God".

A few things I'd like you to take with you:

1. God has given us, and will give us many blessings that we do not deserve.
2. We cannot earn these blessings, but we accept them as "sons and daughters", because God seeks relationship with us, with his "children".
3. Grace should make us joyful. God gives us what we need, not what we deserve.
4. Grace should make us humble, it should puncture our self-righteous pride.
5. Grace should make us loving. As we have been loved, though we are "unloveable", we too should love the "unloveable".