

THE GRACE OF GOD



INTRODUCTION

When Jesus came to this earth, He introduced the idea of grace, which shocked and scandalized the religious people of His day. These religious people, the Pharisees, would keep themselves separate from “sinners”. They would obsess about the smallest of God’s commands while ignoring the heart of it. They would self-righteously consider themselves holy. In contrast, Jesus was the friend of sinners, welcoming immoral people to freely receive God’s forgiveness and love. This was shocking to the Pharisees! They were offended by God’s grace because to them, God was too holy to love unholy people. God is holy, but grace, undeserved favor, enables a holy God to freely love sinful people.

Jesus came to earth, and he confronted the Pharisees with the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which powerfully paints a portrait of a holy God who welcomes sinful people to be His beloved children. The purpose of this study is to introduce this concept of grace.

A STORY OF GRACE

“Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable... “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.”

In Jesus' story, the father has two boys. The Father represents God Almighty, and the two boys represent two different approaches or different ways to relate to God. One day the younger one says, "Dad, I'm splitting. I want my half of the family inheritance right now and I'm leaving." So, he takes half of the family inheritance and leaves and he moves to a foreign country and he wastes his life on wine, women and song (emphasis on the women).

- *How does the younger son relate to his father? What does this tell us about how we often relate to God?*
- *What do you think motivated the younger son to leave the Father? What was he hoping to find when he left his father, who represents God?*

"After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father."

So, after a series of months he's blown it all; out of luck, out of money. He ends up feeding pigs at a farm in a pig trough. There's no ATM around. He's hit the skids and down, destitute, broke and busted. Finding himself flat on his back, he's thinking, 'What am I doing here? I know I blew it, and it's all my own fault but the people who work for my dad as servants, they live better than this.' After coming to this realization, he decides to go home to his father, admit that he completely blew it; wasting his inheritance on sinful things. He doesn't feel worthy to be called his father's son anymore, but hopes that he might be hired as a slave because even his father's servants lived better than he was living.



- *What does the younger son experience in contrast to what he hoped he'd find when he left his father?*
- *What does this tell us about life?*
- *What change of heart did the son experience in verses 17-19?*
- *What does this represent?*

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."

In Jesus' story, when the father saw the son coming home from a long distance, he ran out to meet him. He gives him a giant bear hug and he kisses him. He smiles and celebrates. He doesn't say, 'Go clean up your act. Go get a bath. Repay me first.' He doesn't scold him. He doesn't lecture him. He doesn't give him a sermon or tell him to get everything in shape and come back later to talk then. He just hugs him unconditionally and calls for the best of everything he has to offer; the best robe, the family ring (which was a kind of signet or symbol of the wealth of the family), and the fattened calf. There's no chance that he was going to put his son to work as a servant. He welcomed him home with open arms and immediately starts planning one heck of a party to celebrate a son who was lost but has finally been found!



- *What does the son's return home represent in real life?*
- *What is surprising about the father's reaction toward the son?*
- *Knowing that the Father represents God, how would you expect the father to respond?*

In Jesus' story, the father's response represents God's grace. Notice: the father's sprint was the Greek word for "ran", which is the same as for Olympic Games. Notice that the father kisses the son and strips off the shameful clothing of his past; dressing him in the clothing of someone who belongs in the Father's house. This represents the grace of God being poured out onto us when we return home through salvation. This story is meant to be our story. God does the unthinkable and throws a party in our honor, to celebrate US; our salvation and our return home. NO OTHER RELIGION DESCRIBES A GOD LIKE THIS!! No other religion has the concept of grace illustrated here in Jesus' story.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in.”

“So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.’”

“But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

~ Luke 15

- *Who does the other son represent?*
- *In what way does he model a second way of relating to God?*
- *What does his attitude toward the prodigal son, his brother, reveal about people?*

In this parable, the younger son represents all of us who have wandered away from God, only to be welcomed back home with grace. The older son represents what it is to lack grace. He is resentful and cold toward people who have a past. Legalism, or rule-keeping, is a way of trying to earn God’s favor through our own good works. For this reason, not only did the older son become bitter toward the younger son, but he was also blind to the reality that he, too, was a sinner before a holy God.

GRACE DEFINED

Grace is the undeserved, surprising, outpouring of God’s mercy, forgiveness and power, that is given freely, lavishly, and whole-heartedly without strings attached, to the very people who have made themselves God’s enemies, such that we stand amazed, or more appropriately kneeling, before the cross of Jesus in wonder.

If we take Jesus' story of the prodigal son and place it into the history of our own lives, hearing about the cross of Jesus is the cause of us prodigal sons and daughters returning home to God through salvation. Because Jesus paid the price for our sin, God can lavish His grace upon us. Therefore, an acronym for grace is...

God's
Riches
At
Christ's
Expense

This means Jesus is the revelation of the heart of God as Father toward us. He reveals God's grace, and grace is the center of Christianity; it is the heart of the matter. If you miss this, you miss EVERYTHING.

GRACE VS. WORKS

The gospel of God's grace is very good news, but many of us have never understood the gospel or have distorted it into something very ugly. Because we struggle to believe that God could actually be THIS GOOD, we struggle with thinking we must DO SOMETHING to earn God's love. God will never save us as a result of our performance; our doing good works.

*"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."
~ Ephesians 2:8-9*

Receiving God's grace is an act of humility and faith. As we stop trying to earn God's approval and come to God with empty hands, possessing nothing in ourselves that can impress God. We put our eyes on Jesus crucified and believe He accomplished all of this for us. This story, then, is meant to illustrate the gospel of grace, and free us from guilt, shame and performance. Grace is unique to Christianity. Religion, which comes in many different styles and expressions, is always people achieving their own salvation through their own effort. Grace is the opposite. It is God reaching down to us, through His effort, not ours.

GRACE FOR OUR JOURNEY

Grace is how we begin our journey with Christ, AND how we progress every day. We do not begin by God's grace then perfect ourselves through self-effort. Instead, we rely upon Jesus as the constant source of the grace that we need every day. Tim Keller put it this way, "Belief in the gospel is not just the way to enter the kingdom of God; it is the way to address every obstacle and grow in every aspect. The gospel is not just the 'ABCs' but the 'A-to-Z'" of the Christian life... All our problems come from a lack of orientation to the gospel. Put positively, the gospel transforms our hearts, our thinking and our approach to absolutely everything."

SUMMARY

Jesus' story illustrates two different ways of relating to God; the way of legalism or rule-keeping and the way of grace. God is a God of grace. This good news or gospel is the heart of the Christian life and the life-giving path of our spiritual journey.

"The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope."

~ Tim Keller