



Growth Questions

“Where in your life do you most feel the effects of a performance-based world? How has that translated over into your understanding of God?”

“In what area of your life or in what relationship are you holding something back in case things don’t work out? Does giving God your ‘all’ feel more threatening or inviting?”

“Does the prospect of such a reflection evoke confidence or simply contribute to the tension? Where are there ‘signs of life’?”

“Does your faith feel more like lifeless formalism or a grateful response to love? How would your pursuit of God change if you viewed obedience as opportunities to express gratitude rather than another occasion for dutiful compliance?”

Teaching Notes

Grace is the aggressive, yet respectful movement of God toward us and in us meant to promote and secure our restoration.

Deep within all of us are desires for living humanly (flourishing; becoming who we were created to be) which either eventually get connected to our Creator-God or attached to any number of seemingly attractive options which leave us dissatisfied and disoriented.

Religion (James 1:27) was meant to bring and hold these responses together; to harmonize our lives (*religio*- to connect; ligament).

Granted, this is where we rarely seem to find ‘equilibrium’. There is a limitless variety of religious expression which is demanding and ‘grace-less’, but there is also no shortage of religious expression that is hollow and deceptive--- that doesn’t really expect much of us, and doesn’t really allow us to realize “the more” quality of life we desire.

Grace is certainly best described rather than defined, and we typically know it (recognize it) most in its absence. We live in a world that is **grace-less** [Boko Haram, human trafficking, sex-trade; and the more refined expressions of brokenness: greed and isolation and commitment-less relationships]. **Gracelessness** is a condition that can be traced to (2) human responses (or lack of responses) offered in Romans 1.

For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God. Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks (20-21).

We remain committed to being our own point-of-reference in life. We create God in our image and, therefore, become a cheap imitation of what we were meant to be. We are grateful, but can't find anyone to thank but ourselves.

Truthfully, the gospel is not for people who are satisfied with the way things are. It's not simply for people who are looking to 'reinvent themselves' or make a few 'minor adjustments' to their lives. It's for people who are '*hungry and thirsty*'; '*tired and teachable*' (John 7:37; Matthew 11:28).

It is against that backdrop that Paul insists on remaining centered in love, "... *the love that God lavished on us...*" (1:6-8)

'*excessive, extravagant, over-flowing*'. Lavish is a word used of our economy, or our lifestyle, or our habits/addictions, but rarely a word used of our understanding of or expressions of grace.

We struggle with lavish because it seems so irresponsible. It's the propensity to measure out our resources and gifts to ensure that there'll always be enough for me.

So, Jesus introduces us to an extravagant (lavish) God that is willing to publicly humiliate himself in order to receive and embrace a wayward son. A shepherd who refuses to view a single sheep as 'expendable' and a woman who partied like it's '1999' when she found the one coin she lost. Grace says that God knows the searing pain of loss and the inexplicable joy of rediscovery [Luke 15].

Your faith does not really consist of the things you profess to believe, but the lifestyle that your faith produces.

Throughout the Story, this direct link between our heart, the choices that we make and the life that it produces.

Luke 6:45 "A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart."

While Paul's understanding of the gospel is that salvation is entirely the work of God's grace, he is equally adamant that the whole point of grace at work in us is to realize the outcome of lives that are being transformed by that grace.

Interestingly, we seem to most often reference grace as it relates to God's ceaseless capacity for indulgence, rather than his movements within us which actually allow us to realize a different kind of life--- something more wholesome and less self-destructive.

To be loved in your "mess" without any real potential for experiencing anything different for your life cannot be good news: it's not grace-full.

Faith and deeds are not mutually exclusive. Works are what makes grace recognizable and available.

[John 5:22-30; James 2]

Our deeds provide the context for glory, for example, like the canvas, which gives way to the artisan, eventually brings glory to the painter. Without such expression, could we ever say that we really "know" his/her work?

Knowing that our lives are consequential prevents us from successfully developing this 'hybrid' faith which disconnects belief and behavior; which allows us to make professions which are totally disconnected from the actual way that we conduct our lives. James' honest challenge...

"Can that kind of faith save you?" Can it prove capable of interrupting our self-destructive patterns? Can it reconcile broken relationships or address our addictive tendencies? Can that kind of faith prove to have any restorative value in your life? James challenges us to consider the viability of a faith which professes belief but is void of any deeds (lifestyle) to support such claims ("lifeless").

2 Corinthians 13:5-9

"Examine (for the purpose of ascertaining proof) yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test (scrutinize: see whether a thing is genuine) yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you--unless, of course, you fail the test?"

He's not calling for some **neurotic introspection** which leaves us always feeling as if we can never be sure, but for a serious reflection on our professions of faith and its effects on the actual way that we conduct ourselves. It's that big-o-deal! [1 Thessalonians 4:1; Colossians 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; Philippians 1:27]

Otherwise, it's like the coach that I heard this year during basketball season say of his team that was "0-12" that they were "*actually better than their record indicates*". I wanted to launch my "*Hot Pocket*" at the TV and yell, "**No you're not!**"

"Well, which is it, Phil? Is it by faith or by our deeds?" The answer, of course, is "**yes**".

When Paul talks about "*being saved by grace*", he is renouncing the idea that we contribute anything to the process. Good deeds, of any kind, can neither initiate nor sustain a relationship with God.

But when James declares that "*faith by itself isn't enough*", he means that the deeds/works of our lives are an indispensable expression of the life of God resident within us, as a means of validating (justifying) the faith that we profess. Not making us right, but legitimizing our claims.

The good news is that both the "desire" to obey and the "act of obedience itself" are displays of grace.

Philippians 2:13 "*For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.*"

Even the "**want**" to "**want to do what pleases God**" is a demonstration of grace. Even the desire to desire God pleases him and, most often, your sincere desire counts more than the success or failure of the action itself [e.g. Austin wanted to help paint; went behind him re-painting].

Grace becomes most recognizable in the human person when we are free to choose (to do as we please) and find ourselves choosing what pleases God.

By the same token, I have found that it's hard to keep the rules when you're trying to keep the rules! If we are to fulfill the commands of God [live in proper response to his love], we must be aiming for something higher than simply meeting the "*minimum daily requirements*". Our goal must be to become the kind of person from whom the right kind of behavior (which reflects the goodness of the Law) naturally flows.

**If the message of grace doesn't sound scandalous,
then we haven't presented it properly.
If the message of grace doesn't result in transformed affections and transformed
lives,
then we haven't understood it properly.**