

HOW SWEET THE SOUND, Pastor Phil Strong

Text: Ephesians [selected]

April 17, 2016



Growth Questions

“Do you still marvel at the wonder of grace or have you gradually become convinced that blessing is somehow compensation for your good behavior?”

“When is the last time that grace caught you off-guard? What would it look like for you to surprise someone with grace: to embrace someone who was brazing for the lecture or offer a welcoming countenance to someone waiting for the disapproving glance?”

“How have you seen yourself responding in times of insufficiency in your life: Has it enticed you to fall into grace or has it made you even more stubbornly committed to your all-too-human strategies for making life work without God?”

Teaching Notes

Wherever we look into history, we discover some common human responses:

- The belief that what we were experiencing around us every day was not “self-explanatory”; that the ‘natural’ was indicative of the ‘supernatural’.
- Religion involved a ‘paradigm’, meaning that our thoughts and conclusions about God helped form and inform how we related to our world; helped us answer life questions.
- There was then, out of necessity, some form of response both ethically (in the ways that we were with each other) and supernaturally (responses which we believed connected us to the ‘other’).

Deep within all of us are desires for living humanly which either eventually get connected to our Creator-God or attached to any number of attractive options which leave us dissatisfied and disoriented.

Many religious expressions begin with obedience and attempt to work their way toward acceptance and love. Christianity begins with loving-acceptance and affirms our obedience as evidence that we are *‘living a life of love’*.

Paul calls it “**grace**”. The challenge lies in the fact that not even a good “Google” search is much help when it comes to plumbing the depths of such a notion. Even Paul seems hesitant to attempt to “define” grace, realizing that describing a beautiful, Caribbean sunset is no substitute for experiencing one. Something gets lost in translation.

charis (Greek) - *that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, loveliness: loving-kindness, favor of the merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ.*

So, he offers us a series of metaphors and parallels...

Gift... not gratuity

Ephesians 2:8, 9 *God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God.*

Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

All we have ever known is our feeble attempts at developing a moral portfolio, then presenting it to God for review and approval. The gospel says, definitively, **“Not good enough”**, but offers a healthier alternative: **“How about this? How about seeing your life as a grateful response to love rather than some strenuous effort at earning it?”**

Dead... Alive

Ephesians 2:4,5 *But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!)*

Grace enlivens us and makes us *conscious of and responsive to God and one another.*

Disobedience... Examples of grace

Ephesians 2:1, 7 *Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.*

Grace is God's belief in us when we stop believing in him. Grace engenders a response of loving-obedience rather than dutiful God's compliance.

Excluded... Embraced / Outsiders... Insiders / Far away... Brought near

Ephesians 2:12, 13 *In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.*

Grace is never content when you are outside with your face pressed against the window, but invites you in on all that God is doing. Grace intentionally “closes-the-gap” and refuses to use your brokenness as an excuse for maintaining a comfortable distance.

Hostility... Peace

Ephesians 2:3, 14 *All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God's anger (at enmity), just like everyone else. For Christ himself has brought peace to us.*

Grace makes friends out of enemies.

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

Grace says, "God is a giver", even if we haven't learned healthy ways to receive.

We live in a culture that resists grace at every juncture. We are over-achievers. We operate in a world of quotas and market shares and profit margins and quarterly performance-bonuses.

Even for we as Christians--- people who are supposed to be "poster children" for grace--- it's not our default mode.

Grace ceases to be grace if it is offered as "gratuity" for our compliance; and, grace ceases to be grace if it can be "withdrawn" from us due to our inconsistency.

God has to find a way to deal honestly with our brokenness and sin while allowing us to maintain our dignity and inherent worth. The response? Grace and truth (John 1:14).

Grace without truth ignores our brokenness.

Grace can only truly be appreciated in the context of truth--- the way things really are. Paul argues throughout his letters that we are not essentially "*good people who have a few bad habits*", but people whose nature is essentially flawed and that nature consistently breaks through despite all of our efforts at restraint. The human soul can never be domesticated!

Truth without grace over-looks our vulnerability and frailty.

A persistent emphasis on the truth of our fallenness leaves us feeling isolated and unlovable.

Only those who truly understand the outrageous nature of grace can unhesitatingly consent to their failures.

Grace and truth becomes the path to completion; the pursuit of wholeness.

Grace refuses to allow us to remain bound by and restricted to our addictions and attachments. It continues to make allowances for our sin, but not excuses. Grace says that we are loved without condition, then radically and dramatically alters our condition and brings us into alignment with who God has created us to be.

Grace has nothing to offer the person who thinks they can do life without God.

Truthfully, the gospel is not for people who are satisfied with the way things are. It's not simply for people who are looking for a "performance enhancer" or who are looking to "tweak a few things" in their life, but for people who 'hunger and thirst'. It's for those who have achieved a great deal and have accumulated even more, but *"still haven't found what they're looking for"* (thanks, Bono).

Grace, in its purest form, comes when life has left us so defeated and disoriented that we have no choice but to take it. Until that time comes, we are virtually "un-teachable". God knows that we won't give up without a fight.

We should never assume that our commitment to rigid rule-keeping is indicative of spiritual maturity.

We are naturally pre-disposed to 'law', but such a commitment actually makes relationship impossible because it is not based on mutual acceptance. So, we keep the rules and stay within the lines while the world 'yawns' at grace and we grow increasingly resentful toward this high-maintenance God.

In reality, the only people who love the Law and take it seriously are those who know they can never be saved by it! The only kids who truly enjoy coloring are those who realize that occasionally they will color outside the lines... but their pictures will still make it onto the fridge.

The best response on our part is to simply receive and learn to live grace-fully so that God's grace is not lost on us.

There is one anticipated response on the part of the receiver: gratitude. Not some moral display in order to prove God right for having loved us. Not some false humility that continues to rehearse our un-lovability. Thanks. Saying grace. Living grace-fully.