

“In Christ”: Grace Works
James 2:14-20
11.5.17



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

During Christianity's early days, a monk named Pelagius taught that we must earn our salvation; salvation is all "task." Early church father, Augustine, opposed Pelagius and taught that salvation is all God's doing--- we really don't contribute anything.

To be sure, Paul was not offering us a "two-party" religious system, where some people would earn their acceptance through their attention to detail and others would find their way to God by his favor, alone.

"What are the challenges associated with emphasizing salvation by our deeds? What kind of attitudes or tendencies does it encourage? What about placing the sole responsibility for salvation on God alone, without our participation?"

"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?" 2 Corinthians 13:5-9

"Why is it difficult for us to honestly reflect on the validity of our faith claims without it becoming some unhealthy form of introspection? What do you think Paul's purpose was in encouraging such an approach? Do you think he was saying that we could never quite be sure of our faith, or that he desired that we would be more confident?"

"Do you think grace is a risky message? Won't people take advantage of it and dismiss the character development that God anticipates? Do you think it is more detrimental to 'dilute' grace or to accentuate it and allow that some people will abuse it and misappropriate it?"

"Where are the places of dissonance in your life? Can you identify one issue/relationship in which a commitment to loving-obedience might incite grace? Where are the places of growing confidence in which you see yourself responding grace-fully?"

"How much of your emotional energy is spent bemoaning your failure? How much of it is spent on reveling in your belovedness? Why do you keep returning to your failure as some form of incentive toward righteousness? Why do you think Jesus said to Peter, 'Do you love me?', and not, 'Got anything you'd like to say to me?'"

Teaching Notes...

I think this Story is for those who “ache”; for those who “hunger and thirst”. It is for those who are looking to connect their deepest wounds with their deepest desires and, somehow, find healing.

As Christians, we contend that every human creature has an innate yearning for the fullest experience of God, ourselves, and others in a way that is in keeping with Creative-design. To satisfy that desire, “*in Christ*”, is what makes for “life” (John 14). This *longing* can easily be neglected or ignored, but it never goes away.

When it comes to life, we are often, “asymptomatic”.

We often don't manifest the symptoms which warn of our unhealthy condition. We're not particularly miserable, we're just gradually robbed of life.

It's not until we observe the unprovoked, self-initiated movements of God toward us (grace) that we are made aware of the gravity of our situation and the scope of his restorative action.

Grace starts from a different place than “*self-invention*”. It says that everything's “not” okay. It says that the resources necessary for life are not to be found “*within*” us, apart from God. That there is a “*way that seems right to man*” (Proverbs 14:12), and there's a way that's “right” (John 14).

In this Story, God is depicted as determined to find a way to be with us that didn't ignore all of the dysfunction and disorder, but allowed us to maintain our dignity--- our inherent worth. It says, in so many ways and images, that we are not a ‘failed experiment’ to be abandoned, but a ‘treasure to be recovered’ (Luke 15).

“God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done ...” Ephesians 2

“*Salvation*” is this comprehensive word which distinguishes both the nature of this God and the scope of his intentions toward us. You can only experience the benefits of salvation once you are willing to abandon all of your own deceptive and self-imposed strategies for making life work without him. To “*leave*” (Genesis 15).

Motivating all of God's movements is, “*love*” (John 3); not as a romantic or sentimental expression, but as an expression of love that is unique to him (agape). It is a love that is actually designed “for” the other's sake. It is determined by the character of the “lover” which, in turn, transforms the “beloved”.

The authors offer this love as, ‘*unfathomable*’ (beyond knowledge); as ‘*immeasurable*’ (high, wide, deep: Ephesians 3:18-19), but the source of all things good in our lives and the only legitimate motivation for transformation (Romans 12:1).

Interestingly, the root meaning of the Hebrew word ‘salvation’ means “*to become spacious; to enlarge*”. God keeps calling us into the expansive nature of grace --- the limitless expressions of mutual knowing--- while we remain committed in our attempts to be on our **best behavior** in front of God.

Moralism and relativism are all that we are left with once we give up on grace. Both are a threat to the gospel.

With **moralism**, the gospel gets diluted into some form of etiquette which keeps us focused on meeting the “minimum-daily-God-requirements”.

With **relativism**, there’s nothing to guide us except our own moral compass which, I think we could agree, has proven desperately in need of calibration.

Both are appealing religious expressions, but they make transformation impossible.

The alternative approach is not a faith which makes no demands of us, but a faith that demands something better of us; an appeal to live more “humanly”.

I’m grateful for the “streams” of our faith that help keep us centered in grace and resist the notion of performance-oriented acceptability. I’m also grateful for those traditions which emphasize the “*good that overcomes evil*” (Romans 12). Neither, on its own and devoid of the other, constitutes what we would identify as the gospel.

“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out (“carry out to completion”) your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works (“provides the ability and means”) in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Philippians 2:12-13

There’s certainly a danger in reducing the message to humane acts of kindness toward one another without any suggestion of the necessity of inner-transformation. But, equally deceptive is a message which becomes simply about our own private, personal spiritual experience, but has nothing at all to say about the renewal of the world in which we live. Or, to put it another way: Your experience of grace is only as good as the lifestyle that it produces.

The gospel was coming to bear on a culture that was often described by historians as being “*religious, but not particularly moral*”; meaning, there wasn’t a great deal of ‘carry-over’ between one’s religious affiliations and expressions and their lifestyle.

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

James is not saying, “*Can that kind of faith continue to reserve your place in eternity?*”. He is saying, “*Is that kind of faith really saving you? Is it really demonstrating an ability to interrupt unhealthy patterns in your life? Can it reconcile broken relationships or address our addictive tendencies?*”

It is simply an awareness that our claims of faith are either producing in us “**dissonance**” or “**confidence**”. The tension of the lack of agreement between what we profess to believe and our lifestyle, or a faith “*made more certain*” (2 Peter 1:9) as we see congruence between our claims of faith and our character (Romans 1:9; 9:1; 1 Timothy 1:5, 19; 2 Corinthians 1:12)

“And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect... we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world” (1 John 4:17).

Grace is offered as both “passive” and “participatory”.

The power to realize the “*more than*” life is both something that God accomplishes for us, despite our best efforts, and something that God can only accomplish alongside our best efforts.

Each episode of transformation in our lives displays...

... some honest, self-imposed attempts at restoration.

... frustration, which either makes us more stubbornly committed to the plan, or more willing to collaborate with grace.

... some measure of deliverance (some expression of freeing grace) which is unexplainable; which cannot be attributed to willpower, alone.

Once we determine to respond in loving-obedience to the life-giving ways of Jesus--- despite our hesitation and despite the absence of affirming emotions ("*obedience of faith*", Romans 1:5)--- we actually experience a grace that was previously unavailable to us which empowers us to do the good we are intended to do and commanded to do.

The interesting thing about grace is that it is actually attempting to transform our desires so that we will not remain pre-occupied with our behavior.

Grace always results in the full and free exercise of the transformed human will. Our faith-filled choices always contribute to the 'shalom' we were meant to experience.

"Letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But, letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace" (Romans 8:6).

I think what Paul discovered was that by remaining pre-occupied with our sin, we, rather inadvertently, give it more power over our lives.

Perhaps what Paul is saying is that to remain pre-occupied with sin is to miss the beauty of the life made available by the Spirit.