

What's So Amazing About Grace?

Ephesians 2:4-10 Luke 15:11-32

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But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

This is the word of the Lord!

We just heard one of the great parables that illustrates redemption and grace. One of the great stories of redemption and grace from literature is *Les Misérables*. It's the early 19th century, and there are stirrings of revolution in France—the disparity between wealthy elite and poor/peasants was growing.

The main character, Jean Valjean, is sent to prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister's family. While serving hard labor in prison he tries to escape, is caught, and 15 more years are added to his sentence. While in prison, the once tenderhearted Valjean becomes bitter and hard-hearted toward the world, and toward God.

After 19 years he is released, and given his papers which indicate that he is a convict on parole. His first night out of prison he tries to find a place to stay, but no one will take him in because he is a convict on parole. But his last effort finds him at the parsonage of the kindly old bishop in a small village. The bishop, who is the Christ figure in the story, takes him in, and he and the sisters feed him, nurture him, and extend every kindness to him.

This kindness and mercy put Jean Valjean in a state of confusion, even shock. He expects condemnation and judgment, but he experiences mercy and generosity, and while trying to sleep that night he decides it's too much for him, too good to be true, so he gets up and steals the bishop's valuable silverware so he can sell it for money, and runs away. During the night he is caught, and brought back to the bishop's home early the next morning, and here is where we pick up the story...

As the brother and sister were rising from the table, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," said the bishop.

The door opened. A strange, fierce group appeared on the threshold. Three men were holding a fourth by the collar. The three men were gendarmes; the fourth, Jean Valjean.

A brigadier of gendarmes, who appeared to head the group, was near the door. He advanced toward the bishop, giving a military salute.

"Monseigneur," he said—

At this word, Jean Valjean, who was sullen and seemed entirely dejected, raised his head with a stupefied air.

In the meantime, Monseigneur Bienvenu had approached as quickly as his old age permitted: "Ah, there you are!" he said, looking at Valjean. "I'm glad to see you. But I gave you the candlesticks, too, which are silver like the rest and would bring two hundred francs. Why didn't you take them along with your cutlery?"

Jean Valjean opened his eyes and looked at the bishop with an expression no human tongue could describe.

"Monseigneur," said the brigadier, "then what this man said was true? We met him. He was acting like a fugitive, and we arrested him in order to find out. He had this silver."

"And he told you," interrupted the bishop, with a smile, "that it had been given to him by a good old priest at whose house he had slept. I see it all. And you brought him back here? It's all a mistake."

"If that's so," said the brigadier, "we can let him go."

"Please do," replied the bishop.

The gendarmes released Jean Valjean, who shrank back.

"Is it true they're letting me go?" he muttered, as if talking in his sleep.

"Yes! You can go. Don't you understand?" said a gendarme.

"My friend," said the bishop, "before you go away, here are your candlesticks. Take them."

He went to the mantelpiece, took the two candlesticks, and handed them to Jean Valjean. The two women observed without a word, gesture, or look that could disturb the bishop.

Jean Valjean was trembling all over. He took the two candlesticks distractedly, with a bewildered expression.

"Now," said the bishop, "go in peace. By the way, my friend, when you come again, you needn't come through the garden. You can always come and go by the front door. It is only closed with a latch, day or night."

Then, turning to the gendarmes, he said, "Messieurs, you may go." The gendarmes left.

Jean Valjean felt like a man about to faint.

The bishop approached him and said in a low voice, "Do not forget, ever, that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man."

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of any such promise, stood dumbfounded. The bishop had stressed these words as he spoke them. He

continued, solemnly, "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!"

For me, this is one of the best and most beautiful illustrations of grace in all of literature. This bishop saw something in Jean Valjean and knew that an act of grace would change his life. The bishop called him friend, like Jesus so often did with people.

Grace. It's such a familiar word. We read about it, we sing songs about it (like Amazing Grace); but do we truly comprehend what grace is and does, from a Biblical & Christian perspective? The word grace literally means "gift," and because it's so familiar—and to us church-going folks especially, we easily take for granted how amazing it really is; what an amazing *gift* God's mercy and redemption and forgiveness are. Not to mention the daily blessings we all experience.

Grace is one of the marks of Christianity—perhaps THE mark of Christianity—and of the Church (in terms of our grace-transformed lives, and the grace we extend to others as we live our Monday through Saturday lives; as Paul says, we are what God has made us, and re-made us to be: people of grace and gracious good work in the world).

Grace is what makes Christianity unique and distinct and it's essentially what the church has to offer the world. Without grace, all we have to share with the world is either rules ("be good or else" and other forms of bad religion, which the inspector Javert represents in Les Miz story), or, without grace, we offer warm and fuzzy feel-good faith. Grace, however, is transformative in nature, and substantial, and has the potential to alter the course of a person's life.

So, what is grace? Grace, Biblically-speaking, is unmerited favor from the God of heaven and earth. Grace is the recognition that I am receiving something, spiritually at least, that I don't deserve, that I didn't earn. It's a gift. This is hard for us Americans: our protestant work ethic says, "Earn it. Work for it." Grace says, "Receive it. It's a gift. And simply be grateful for it. And then, "Return it, and give it away." That sounds easy, but it isn't. Somehow it sounds too good to be true, or we feel like we should get what we deserve (or not get what we don't deserve—that we should earn the good things that come to us).

Flannery O'Connor (a brilliant Christian writer who portrayed both grace and ungrace in her wonderful short stories) once said: "All human nature vigorously resists grace, because grace changes us, and change is painful." This is a good insight into human nature. Obeying rules, or being punished and "getting

what we deserve” is often, strangely, preferred over grace sometimes; but they don’t require us to change. Inspector Javert, from *Les Miz*, who represents the Law (both Biblical law, and civil law, and rules, and obedience and maintaining perfect order, is confronted with grace at one point in the story—his life is spared and he expected punishment and death—and he has this moment of reckoning. Because in that moment, he knew that grace—that particular experience of grace—would require him to change, his entire worldview, his thinking and behaving. And it would have been painful for him, and he knew it. I won’t say what happened (in case you haven’t read the book or seen the musical), but let’s say that Flannery O’Connor was right. “Human nature vigorously resists grace, because grace changes us, and change is painful.”

Justice has been defined as getting what we deserve; mercy as *not* getting what we deserve; grace is getting what we don’t deserve. So, grace is transformative; it’s having our whole life turned inside out by the unmerited love and generosity of another. Read the rest of *Les Miz* and we read about a man whose life was transformed by grace, and who then lived a life of grace toward others.

It's not stretching things to say that we live in a world that lacks grace—whether it's because of the influence of bad religion, or peoples' personal woundedness that hasn't been resolved and healed, which then leaks out or is inflicted on others, or because, in our society, we are better at competing than cooperating. Whatever the reason, we live in a world that lacks grace. Yet it is a world that is, at the same time, desperately *hungry* for grace. A world that starves for grace. Many who have been part of Christ's church starve for grace too! Yet, the church of Jesus Christ has struggled over the years to be people of grace, to each other and to the world.

Mark Twain used to say he put a cat and a dog together in a cage as an experiment, to see if they could get along. They did. Then he put in a bird, a pig, and a goat. They, too, all got along fine after a few adjustments. Then he put in a Baptist, a Presbyterian, and a Catholic and soon there was not a living thing left.

Unfortunately, the Church has sometimes been a communicator of ungrace, rather than of the scandalous love and acceptance of a Father, God, who loves people unconditionally and is willing to go to any and every length to draw them to his heart, to welcome them home, as Jesus' beautiful parable communicates. God longs to be gracious, and the world is hungry for grace.

Ernest Hemingway recounts a story from his travels to Spain. A Spanish father decides to reconcile with his son who had run away to Madrid from Barcelona where their home was. Remorseful, the father took out an ad in a prominent Madrid newspaper. The ad said, "Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana, noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa." Paco is a fairly common name in Spain, and when the father goes to the hotel to meet his son, he finds 300 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers. The world is starved for grace. For unconditional love, unmerited favor, riches of kindness from God, and from fellow human beings.

And we really only understand grace, and truly experience it, when we get to the end of ourselves, like the younger son in the prodigal son story. By the way, the older son was at the end of himself too, and lost—he just didn't know it or recognize it. He was lost in resentment. But did you notice the grace and generosity offered to him as well? To this dutiful older brother, the gracious Father says, "You are always with me, and all that I have is yours." Ok, wow. Can we pause just for a moment and take that in? "You are always with me, and all that I have is yours." The same generosity of grace is offered to dutiful and responsible children as it is to wayward and lost children.

The point is, grace is truly experienced as grace when we understand and experience our need. Our need for forgiveness & redemption, our need for reconciliation in a relationship, or emotional healing; our need for God to set us free from self-destructive habits, or just plain self-centeredness.

Musician Steven Curtis Chapman (in an interview a few years ago) made an insightful comment: “We don’t cry ‘Abba (Father)!’ until we’ve first cried ‘Uncle!’” I give up. I’m at the end of myself. Will someone please save me from me?!? He said this following a tragic accident that caused the death of one of his children.

Grace becomes most real to us when we recognize that we can’t save ourselves or make ourselves better by some force of soul or more willpower or more intellect or information, or greater efforts to be good. Without a recognition of our need, there is no such thing as grace.

Reminds me of a television celebrity, who took every opportunity to tell the public that she was a Christian. She started her own clothing line and promoted it every time she was on t.v. (and she reminded everyone she was a Christian). Then it was discovered that her clothes were being made in sweat shops in places like India and Pakistan—even using child labor. When confronted about this, she would say things like, “I’m a good person; I don’t deserve all this criticism.” Okay,

you may be a nice person, but you're still being irresponsible and causing harm by building your business on the backs of child labor. Here was an opportunity for someone who names Jesus Christ as their Savior to say, "I'm in the wrong" (in other words, I need grace; I've been messing up) and then make it right. Instead, she maintained that *she* was a victim.

She could've done what king David did, in the Old Testament. When confronted with his wrongdoing he said, "I did it." Read psalm 51. It's David's honest admission. David says, "I need grace; I can't save myself. Lord, have mercy on me." And as David freely opened up about his wrongdoing, and admitted his need, he freely received the gift of God's unmerited favor. And, as we read his story in the Old Testament, he made things right, out of gratitude for God's grace, and let it change him.

And btw this is why we have prayers of confession, and assurance, every Sunday (*almost* every Sunday); not to make us feel like we're a horrible person and that we have to grovel before God, but to provide the opportunity to be reminded each week that we are graced, that we have been given an extraordinary gift that frees us. And therefore, we can be honest with God with whatever is going on in our lives, knowing, ahead of time, that God's riches of

grace are ours. That redemption and healing and renewal are ours. That freedom is ours, freedom to live unburdened from guilt and shame. And therefore, freedom to love as graced people, who become the hands and feet and voice of Jesus in a world that is hungry for grace.

So, friends: may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God your heavenly father, and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit be yours now and forever. Amen.

Let's stand and sing the song written by a former slave trader whose life was transformed from the inside out by God's grace...