

“Grace: The Spirit’s Art”

Isaiah 43:1-5a, Romans 8:32-35

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Without grace, there will be no way to understand the truth of Christianity. Theologian Robert McAfee Brown once wrote that “grace is the most important word in the Protestant vocabulary.” But, he says, “it’s also the most abused.” Many Christians in our contemporary time may understand God’s grace as “God’s good luck” that will give us psychological and material blessings. And we can entertain our souls or enjoy our lives. But this isn’t grace. A theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) reminds us that grace should be costly because it compels us to follow Christ. He challenges us not to enjoy cheap grace, but wrestle seriously about your forgiveness, salvation and your responsibility as a disciple of Christ. Truly, grace is essential and yet a mysterious word that describes your personal relationship with God. And your Christian faith is clearly manifested and confirmed in your encounter with Christ as a follower of His teachings. What did Christ really teach us about grace?

I am going to share four brief points about grace: You’re *connected to God’s love; you’re accepted; gifted; and assured of faith that God is always with you.* First, Grace is the assurance of faith that you’re connected to God. Our first Scripture reading describes the Apostle Paul’s confession. He used to be a harsh persecutor of Christ followers, but now he is on a totally opposite side. He is faced with hardship, distress, famine, peril, and persecution because of Jesus Christ whom he trusts. What makes him have courage, boldness to resist all anguish and pain in front of the crisis of death? Verse 35 is giving us a clear answer on his devotion and faith in Jesus Christ. He says, “***Who will separate us from the love of Christ?*** Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” Paul deeply realized who God is through the experience of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus’ death was not a mere event of a human being’s death, but it was God’s unconditional love for himself. When he heard Jesus’ voice, he realized the love of God which is not limited, under the power of death. He finally believed that the Love of God is beyond death and he could have confidence that he is connected to that love of God which will never be broken. If you believe that you’re connected to God, you know what grace means.

Second, Grace is the assurance of faith that you're accepted by God. Paul Tillich, a great theologian and philosopher in his article, "The Shaking of the Foundation" suggests to us an expression of "acceptance" to understand God's grace in Christian faith. He redefines the word of "sin" as another word, "separation" not as a substitute for the word "sin" but as a useful clue in the interpretation of the word "sin". The word "sin" has the same root as the word "asunder". In any case, *sin is a separation*. To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation. Speaking of "grace", grace has power to reconcile and reconnect the separated and broken relationships back to the united one. In grace something is overcome; grace occurs in spite of something; grace occurs in spite of separation and estrangement. He explains that Grace is the reunion of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with itself, **Grace is the acceptance of that which is separated and rejected**. Many of us struggle with trusting the truth that we're acceptable to and accepted by God. We are accepted not because of what we do or don't do; we are accepted not because of how we succeed or if we're good. We are accepted not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

Third, Grace is something you can never get but only be given. It is like God's special and free gift for us even though we may not deserve it. God has no condition to share it with us. Regarding free grace, many and even great people of faith had struggled to understand God between His righteousness and the free gift of grace. These are the Apostle Paul, Martin Luther and John Wesley. They questioned the idea about sinners' qualifications whether they were righteous "enough" to claim this *free grace*. Romans 1:17 is one of the controversial biblical passages. It says "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." We often call this "**Justification by faith**". How does this verse sound to you? Bible Scholar, clergy and poet Eugene Peterson in his paraphrased Bible, *The Message*, he interprets it as follows:

"It's news I'm most proud to proclaim, this extraordinary Message of God's powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him, starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else! God's way of putting people right shows up in the acts of faith, confirming what Scripture has said all along: "The person in right standing before God by trusting him really lives."

This seems to be very simple, but there has been centuries of debate between the Catholic Church and Protestant Churches for sixteen centuries. Traditional Roman Catholic teaching regards justification as a process in which a sinner is made righteous. In other words, justification follows sanctification (holy life).

The Roman Catholic is taught to come to faith by good works, but the Protestant, to come to good works by faith.¹ Let me introduce two important figures who interpreted this Catholic tradition in a different way. Those are Martin Luther and John Wesley.

Martin Luther said, “Paul is not talking about the righteousness by which God Himself is righteous, but a righteousness that God gives freely by His grace to people who don’t have righteousness of their own. It’s a righteousness that outside of us, namely, the righteousness of Christ.”² And this was the moment of awakening for Luther. Martin Luther as a Catholic monk, he had tried every Catholic ritual and discipline to sanctify his righteousness, kneeling in prayer, fasting and even climbing a Roman staircase on his knees, but he realized that he couldn’t claim righteousness. He hated the word, righteousness. But Catholic church fathers understood the doctrine of justification is what happens when God, through the sacraments of the church and elsewhere, makes unrighteous people righteous. Luther experienced deep and terrifying spiritual crisis and struggles. In the middle of his crisis periods, he was driven to reconsider Paul’s own understanding about the righteousness of God that is ours by faith. In our Lenten Small group study “*Revival*”, Rev. Adam Hamilton describes Luther’s awakening moment of God’s grace as follows:

Suddenly Luther “Got it” and began to trust God’s righteousness and acceptance... Then he felt as if he had been completely born again and had entered paradise through widely opened doors... Rule-based faith imagines a God who is never satisfied. This type of faith may be based on guilt, fear or doubt about doing enough to please God.³

When John Wesley was in great despair, he did not have the faith to continue to preach and found little comfort in his religion. One evening he reluctantly attended a meeting in Aldersgate where someone read from Luther's *Preface to the Epistle to Romans*. Wesley felt a change in which God was working in his heart through faith in Christ. He felt his heart strangely warmed and trust in Christ. Christ alone for salvation. And Wesley felt he was given an assurance that Christ had taken away his sins, and saved him from the law of sin and death. He finally came to believe in confidence that **it is not Christ and good works, but Christ alone who saves, resulting in good works.**⁴ John Wesley was clearly and firmly able to believe confidently that Grace is a gift by the assurance of faith.

¹ <http://www.the-highway.com/articleJan98.html>

² <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/justification-faith-alone-martin-luther-and-romans-117/>

³ Adam Hamilton, “*Revival: Faith As John Wesley Lived It*” (Abingdon Press: Nashville: 2014) p.60

⁴ <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/john-wesleys-heart-strangely-warmed-11630227.html>

Lastly, Grace is an assurance of faith that God is always with us and around us. Our second Scripture reading wonderfully summarizes what grace is all about. In verse 5, the Prophet Isaiah says “Fear not, for I am with you.” The essence of Christian faith is to give our trust in God and discover God’s saving grace in Christ Jesus. How can we have faith to discover all these great gifts of grace in us and around us? That is the Holy Spirit’s art and guidance. Grace is a mysterious gift and blessing and the Holy Spirit enables us to experience and receive *that* precious gift. A retired Episcopal bishop Steven Charleston beautifully defines the gift of grace this way:

Grace is like the unexpected call of a friend just when you need it most, grace arrives unannounced. A door opens. A path becomes clear. An answer presents itself. The right person walks into your life. These thousand silent streams, the movement of grace, weave through our lives, protecting, nurturing, supporting, transforming us from helpless to hopeful, giving us the tools to craft change, revealing a different future. Grace is the Spirit's art: each one designed uniquely, shaped to fit perfectly, given in beauty, received in wonder. Grace is what it feels like to be touched by God.

Frederick Buechner, a writer and theologian shares his wisdom, in his book, *Now and Then and Listening to Your Life*:

Listen to your life...Grace not merely as your faith statement, but as a sign of God’s ongoing presence in your daily living. God is everywhere you are, and in the midst of our gatherings. Christian faith helps us discover moments of God’s grace in life together.⁵

Christianity is a journey. Along the way we travel, we meet God the divine grace and accept Jesus Christ as our companion with his *saving grace*. When Jesus went to the wilderness, his purpose was to make space for grace in his life. While we are continuing our Lenten journey in this special and holy season, we are invited to discover the love of God and make space for grace in our lives like Jesus. Why don’t you try to find some signs of God’s grace in you and around you? I hope that you will find more great opportunities to get closer to God during Lent discovering moments of God’s grace that God has blessed in your life. Amen.

⁵ published in *Secrets in the Dark*