

Growing in Grace

Lesson # 3

"Underserving, Yet Unconditionally Loved"

1 Corinthians 15:9-11; 2 Samuel 9

(Sermon ideas from "The Grace Awakening" by Chuck Swindoll, chapter 4)

Introduction

What does grace mean to us? To some, it's little more than something you say before you eat. To others, it is applied to a gymnast who moves through the air with fluid ease. Sometimes it's used to describe the very presence of nobility. There is even a thing called a "grace" note in musical scores. Biblically, grace is immeasurably more than we have termed it to be. "Unmerited" or "undeserved" favor. Grace is our only hope to know God. Without grace, no one who has ever lived or ever will live could know the joy of being in fellowship with God. Today, we are just beginning to grasp it. A lifetime of studying grace would only introduce it to us. The great apostle Paul talked about grace.

1 Corinthians 15:9-11

"For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (10) But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. (11) Therefore, whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed."

Paul certainly hadn't earned the right to be an apostle. He considered himself the "least" of the apostles. Grace transformed Paul from an archenemy of the Christian faith to its staunchest defender.

From a rigid, legalistic Pharisee to a compassionate, Christ-like person. God's grace can do the same for us. There is no heart so hard that His grace cannot soften it. There is no life so low that His grace cannot lift it to exalted heights.

I. REAFFIRMING THE TRUTH OF GRACE

Paul's beliefs on grace as revealed in (1 Cor. 15:9-11) can be declared in three simple statements.

1. *"God does what He does by His grace."* Would we have ever asked Paul to help our cause? We should not try to always explain what God can and cannot do, because He does it by His grace, not by our opinions.

2. *"I am what I am by the grace of God."* He was a disgusting disgrace to the cause of Christ—although he was doing what he thought was right. There certainly was nothing that earned Paul the right to be an apostle. Wouldn't it be shocking today to hear someone say, *"Don't be impressed at all by me, My only claim to fame is the undeserved grace of God."*

3. *"I let you be what you are by the grace of God."* Paul knew that others enjoyed the same grace that he now enjoyed.

Illustration: *In Charles Schultz's cartoon, "Peanuts," Lucy is seen saying that if she was in charge of the world, she'd change everything. Charlie says, "That wouldn't be easy. Where would you start?" Lucy looks directly at him, and without hesitation, points her finger at him and says, "I'd start with you!"* And so it is with those who live their lives pointing out your one fault while ignoring that they too live under grace to cover their faults.

Jackie Hudson wrote a book entitled: *Doubt: A Road to Growth*. *"Early in my career, I had a boss who held to numerous spoken and unspoken rules. One was that I needed to have my lights out by 11:00 p.m. so I wouldn't be tired on the job the next day. His house was not far from mine, and if he noticed my lights on after 11, I heard about it the next day. I remember my first compliment from him—a full year after I'd been on the job. I'd been given a project and I worked night and day to make it perfect and thus win his approval. The day of the event, he wanted all the other employees to arrive an hour early to help with preparations. Even though I explained that it wouldn't be necessary, he insisted. After all the employees stood around for an hour with nothing to do, the program began. I couldn't have been more pleased with the event—the project was flawless. Afterward, my boss walked up to me, looked down at the floor, and out of his mouth came those long awaited words, 'Well done, Ms. Hudson.' My year in that environment brought on a remarkable response—rebellion. I was hardly growing in grace. Grace is fertile soil. Grace focuses on what God is and what He has done and takes the focus off ourselves and yet it is so easy to think that we need to do something to earn God's favor as though grace is too good to be true."*

Most Christians live their lives like they're going to be graded by God once a year, but the truth is that all God's wrath was poured out on His Son. The reason He brought Him back from the grave is because He was satisfied with His Son. And if He's satisfied with His Son's death for sin, and I find myself, by faith, through grace in the Son, He's satisfied with me! Will you ever believe that? We will forever have bosses who will give us lists, and people who will want us to do more to stay in bounds of their conditional love. They will use guilt until we are driven mad—but not God!

Elizabeth Elliot wrote *The Liberty of Obedience* about a young man's quest to forsake all and follow Christ. Here are the worldly things he was told to forsake: *"Colored clothes, for one thing. Get rid of everything in your wardrobe that is not white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments and don't eat any more white bread. You cannot, if you are sincere about obeying Christ, take warm baths or shave your beard. To shave is to lie against Him who created us, to attempt to improve on His work."* [Quoted by Jackie Hudson in *Doubt: A Road to Growth* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1987), p. 105]

Sounds absurd, doesn't it? This was the list given in the most acclaimed Christian schools in the second century! Before we laugh, let's look at the list we have created and what

they will sound like to the generations to follow. What lists of do's and don'ts have we concocted? What merit badges must others earn to be accepted into our circle of conditional love? Who gave us the right to give someone else a list to live by? For there to be genuine growth in grace, there must be room to grow (even room to fail). We will cut each other down. Grace must be risked, or else we'll produce a pygmy Christian who knows nothing of Christ except someone else's expectations.

II. CONSIDERING AN EXAMPLE OF GRACE

In the Old Testament, when new kings came into power, the former monarch's family was destroyed. When news of the death of King Saul reached his family, they fled fearing that the new king, David, would do the customary thing of destroying them. We see the scene in (2 Sam 4:4) *"(Jonathan son of Saul had a son who was lame in both feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. His nurse picked him up and fled, but as she hurried to leave, he fell and became crippled. His name was Mephibosheth.)"* (NIV)

It all began with a question asked recorded in (2 Samuel 9:1): "Now David said, "Is there still anyone who is left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" David is not only reigning in the land, he is reigning in the hearts of the people. His success has been great so far (Bathsheba hasn't come into the picture yet.) While reflecting on the abundance of God's blessings, he remembers another blessing God had given him—Jonathan.

1. Grace is Extended on the Merit of another. (1 Sam 20:12-17)

As he thought about Jonathan, he remembered the promise that they had made to each other recorded in 1 Samuel 20:12-17.

"Then Jonathan said to David: "The LORD God of Israel is witness! When I have sounded out my father sometime tomorrow, or the third day, and indeed there is good toward David, and I do not send to you and tell you, (13) may the LORD do so and much more to Jonathan. But if it pleases my father to do you evil, then I will report it to you and send you away, that you may go in safety. And the LORD be with you as He has been with my father. (14) And you shall not only show me the kindness of the LORD while I still live, that I may not die; (15) but you shall not cut off your kindness from my house forever, no, not when the LORD has cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth." (16) So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, "Let the LORD require it at the hand of David's enemies." (17) Now Jonathan again caused David to vow, because he loved him; for he loved him as he loved his own soul."

As David remembers Jonathon, he asks this question: *"Is there yet anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?"* The Hebrew word translated "kindness" is *chesed* In the Old Testament, it is often rendered as "mercy," "loving kindness," or "grace." As he looks around to show the *chesed* of God, he doesn't look for someone who deserves it, qualifies for it, or worth it.

His servant Ziba answers in 2 Samuel 9:2, "And there was a servant of the house of Saul whose name was Ziba. So when they had called him to David, the king said to him, "Are you Ziba?" He said, "At your service!" (3) Then the king said, "Is there not still someone of the house of Saul, to whom I may show the kindness of God?"

You can almost hear the "no" in Ziba's reply in verse 3. "There is still a son of Jonathan who is lame in his feet." The king is not in the least bit phased by the fact that this man is a crippled (v. 4) reveals that the king says "Where is he?" In reply to David's question Ziba tells him "he is in the house of Machir ..., in Lo Debar." Lo-Debar comes from two Hebrew words. Lo means "no" Debar means "pasture." So Lo-Debar is a place of "no pasture" or a wasteland. Mephibosheth had only wanted anonymity and had expected to have it in this no man's land, yet David sought him out and came to him.

2. Grace is Beyond our Comprehension (2 Samuel 9:5, 6)

"Then King David sent and brought him out of the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, from Lo Debar. (6) Now when Mephibosheth the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, had come to David, he fell on his face and prostrated himself. Then David said, "Mephibosheth?" And he answered, "Here is your servant!"

This helpless cripple fell on his face in the trembling awareness that all descendants of previous dynasties were customarily exterminated. He thought that he would never get up from the floor alive.

3. Grace is Undeserved. (2 Samuel 9:7)

The words that reach Mephibosheth's ears are not ones of judgement, but of mercy.(2 Samuel 9:7) "So David said to him, "Do not fear, for I will surely show you kindness for Jonathan your father's sake, and will restore to you all the land of Saul your grandfather; and you shall eat bread at my table continually."

Notice there is no mention of individual merit on Mephibosheth's part that he should deserve such kindness. (Then it wouldn't be grace!) Grace is acceptance without reservation, forgiveness without condemnation, pardon without probation—it is unconditional, unrestrained love!

4. Grace must be accepted. (2 Samuel 9:8-13)

"Then he bowed himself, and said, "What is your servant, that you should look upon such a dead dog as I?" (9) And the king called to Ziba, Saul's servant, and said to him, "I have given to your master's son all that belonged to Saul and to all his house. (10) You therefore, and your sons and your servants, shall work the land for him, and you shall bring in the harvest, that your master's son may have food to eat. But Mephibosheth your master's son shall eat bread at my table always." Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. (11) Then Ziba said to the king, "According to all that my lord the king has commanded his servant, so will your servant do." "As for Mephibosheth," said the king, "he shall eat at my table like one of the king's sons." (12) Mephibosheth had a young son whose name was Micha. And all who

dwelt in the house of Ziba were servants of Mephibosheth. (13) So Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem, for he ate continually at the king's table. And he was lame in both his feet.”

Initially, Mephibosheth recoils from this generosity, thinking that he doesn't deserve this kindness. David lifts him from the floor and seats him at his own table with his family to enjoy all the blessings of the royal family. Imagine the arrangements years from then at the table: David at the head of the table; Amnon (clever, witty, winsome), Tamar (the charming, beautiful daughter), Solomon (wise, brilliant heir-apparent), Absalom (handsome, perfect in appearance), Joab (the courageous warrior)...then Mephibosheth comes hobbling in on his crutches. The tablecloth covered his feet!

Amazing grace—how sweet the sound! And Mephibosheth knew the sound!

Conclusion

Seeing the analogies of grace:

Once Mephibosheth had enjoyed fellowship with his father. And also so had humanity in the garden of Eden.

When disaster struck, fear came, and Mephibosheth suffered a fall that crippled him for life. Similarly, when sin came, humanity suffered a fall, which has left us permanently crippled.

Out of unconditional love for his friend Jonathon, David sought out anyone to whom he might extend his grace. In a similar manner, God, because of His unconditional love for us, He sent His Son and seeks out anyone to whom He might extend His grace.

The crippled man was destitute and undeserving. All he could do was accept the king's favor. So, also, we sinners are undeserving and without hope. In no way are we worthy of our King's favor. All we can do is humbly accept it.

The king took the crippled Mephibosheth from a barren wasteland and seated him at the royal banquet table in the palace. God, our Father, has done the same for us. He rescued us from our own personal Lo-debar, from a moral wasteland, and He seated us in a place of spiritual nourishment and intimacy.

David adopted Mephibosheth into his royal family, providing him with every blessing within the palace. We also have been adopted into a family—God's family. And He gives us full privileges within His household.

Mephibosheth's limp was a constant reminder of David's grace. So also, our moral feebleness keeps us from ever forgetting that where sin abounds, grace abounds that much more.

When Mephibosheth sat at the king's table, he was treated with the same respect and given the same privileges as David's own sons. When we one day attend the great wedding feast of the Lamb, the same will be true for us as well. We will sit with the prophets and

priests, apostles and evangelists, pastors and missionaries. And we will be there with them because that same tablecloth of grace covers all our feet!

We have much to be thankful for. John Bunyan, In *Saved by Grace* writes: *"Thou Son of the Blessed! What grace was manifest in thy condescension! Grace brought thee down from heaven; grace stripped thee of thy glory; grace made thee poor and despicable; grace made thee bear such burdens of sin, such burdens of sorrow, such burdens of God's curse, as are unspeakable! O Son of God! Grace was in all thy tears! Grace came bubbling out of thy side with thy blood! Grace came forth with every word of thy sweet mouth!...grace came out where the whip smote thee, where the nails and spear pierced thee! O blessed Son of God! Here is grace indeed! Unsearchable riches of grace! Unthought of riches of grace! Grace to make angles wonder, grace to make sinners happy, grace to astonish devils!"* [John Bunyan, *Saved by Grace* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1852), p. 33]