



## WAYS WE EXPERIENCE GOD: HOLY GRACE

Philippians 1:2-11

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

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Philippians 1:2

Many religions emphasize love and even those without any religion see the merit of love. But the type of love that Christians speak of is a radically alien way of treating other people – and it's disappearing in this world – most pointedly seen in the scorched-earth mentality found in the news pundits and the social-media clowns.

Name calling is part of the problem in the world, so I apologize. But I call them clowns, not just to be derogatory, but to point to their essence.

A clown is someone  
who looks like a person,  
but with exaggerated features  
an extra wide smile,  
big red nose,  
oversized feet  
and rather insane actions.

The clown's purpose is to exaggerate, in order to evoke a reaction. The clown's purpose is to evoke laughter. But the purpose of many social-media minions is more nefarious – to exaggerate our baser emotions of hatred, judgement, separatism, and more.

Perhaps most disconcerting of all are those Christians who use these same methods to justify any kind of behavior in order to support their own goals. But what they, and all the others, fail to realize is what is so amazing about grace. All the problems in this world can be understood through our failure to know and live grace.

But we don't really know what grace is...

Grace is elegance and poise in movement

...Grace is good manners in civil society

...Grace is a prayer before a meal

...Grace is an extended period of time  
before repayment of a loan

With all these different types of grace, we might be forgiven for failing to realize what its essence is.

For the essence of grace **IS** the essence of God.

Grace, perhaps more than any other word in all of Scripture, captures the core of the Lord Jesus Christ, his unique calling and the nature of his love.

Grace is not a provisional measure you apply at certain times.

Grace was not a temporary tactic God used on the cross.

It is always the right time for grace.

Especially when those who oppose you employ the baser tactics.

So when the world was at its worst,  
Christ took it upon himself,  
not fighting,  
not cursing,  
not getting down on their level,  
he took it all,  
every last nail,  
until before his last breath he prayed,  
"Father, forgive them."

Grace is that moment in which you receive love and kindness when what you deserve is a reprimand or a punishment.

Which leads us to our next experience of God in our seven-week series:

*Holy Grace: Experiencing God's wondrous mercy, healing, peace and presence in times of personal crisis, hardship, or tragedy.*

The text is drawn once again from Paul,  
*Grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

In my sabbatical journeys, people shared stories of knowing such grace. And, perhaps, out of all the

other moments of God this one catches you off guard, surprises your heart and makes you gasp for air from the unexpected wonder of it all!

It is often brief moments of being reminded of our loved ones that this rush of grace comes – because they remind us of all the good things that we had. It makes us gasp for breath because, up until this moment, we had been sucking air through a straw.

This past year, I was privileged to be a part of the Regional Fellows program, in which you spend nine months learning more about Spartanburg Regional Hospital System and, if you are lucky, even take a ride in the emergency helicopter. But one tour truly enabled you to feel empathy for the sick.

For a few moments (not even minutes) we had to breathe through a straw – to mimic the stress of having to breath on a vent – to better understand what those with C.O.P.D. and other lung problems experience 24 hours a day.

It only took a few labored breaths,  
until I began to feel  
deprived of oxygen,  
lightheaded,  
and a rising panic.

As I listened to people's experience of grace, it seemed like a type suffocation they were experiencing.

But, instead of lack of oxygen,  
it was lack of health,  
love,  
and most of all hope.  
It became clear  
that part of experiencing the grace of God  
is first knowing its absence.

It is the Christ on the cross,  
crying out in horror,  
at the God who abandoned him.

But when that trickle of Holy Spirit power  
becomes a flood of God's love,  
the rush of it  
makes you swoon

and praise  
at its power  
and wonder.

One very practical and analytical woman told the story of experiencing God's grace after the death of her husband.

*I received a holy nudge...I teach people not to give money on the street...I saw a guy...with a thin blanket shivering... I see this guy and he reminds me of my husband. And so I walk up to him and said, "Are you hungry?" He wanted a biscuit and coffee; I looked at him; in some ways he reminds me of my husband...I am a sucker for blue eyes...I had peace knowing that at least in part God put him there for me...*

As she told the story, her voice conveyed the surprising, exceedingly delightful, nature of this moment of a keen awareness of this existence after only knowing the pain of his absence before.

But the grace of God can be found in even the simplest of gifts. I remember visiting one church member who had practically lived in the hospital for months. My heart went out to him, not just because of the illness, but as he spoke you could tell his life had become utterly bland and routine. He was not only sick, but depressed by the monotony.

But in an instant, his countenance changed. His wife walked in with a Sugar and Spice Pimento Cheeseburger and Fries! The tenor of the conversation changed and, for a moment, he forgot his misery and trajectory. A little kindness can become a heaping serving of the grace of God when given at the right moment.

But the place in which I have seen more joy over the gift of grace was at Trenton State Prison, a maximum-security facility with 80% of those incarcerated serving maximum sentences for violent crimes. When I visited during the week, as a Chaplain, many of the men walked through the halls in a half state.

They seemed almost comatose,

but they were numb from the horror  
of the endless years  
of locked bars  
that faced them  
day after day,  
after day, after day,  
after day, after day...

But when I visited on Sunday it was different.  
Profoundly,  
...incredibly,  
...powerfully,  
...wonderfully,  
**different.**

The first time I entered that chapel, I felt like I had been transported to another world – and it was found in the music and the prayers. Music filled with the full measure of absolute freedom.

Freedom from guilt.  
Freedom from feeling like something less than human.  
Freedom from feeling like a failure.  
Freedom from fear.  
Freedom in Christ,  
through the redemption in his blood,  
and resurrection from the tomb.

The scene was ripped straight from the Bible. They sang with a passion and joy completely unfettered by human expectations.

Like that woman who washed Jesus' feet  
with her tears,  
so overwhelmed  
by the gracious love given to her.

And as I watched that scene, I knew...

I had never felt that kind of love for my Lord...

...and then Jesus' words echoed in my heart,  
"Those who are forgiven much, love much."

Now I knew in my head,  
I had much to be forgiven for.  
But my sins  
hadn't broken the laws of society  
and led me to be locked up  
and discarded by the world...

That was the only real difference  
between them and me  
in the eyes of God.

This leads us to Paul's opening words to the Philippians in our text this week. Paul opened several of his letters with similar words because he wanted to set the stage for what would follow.

As we know  
Paul experienced the gift of grace  
in the most dramatic of fashions,  
when Christ struck him blind  
but did not strike him down.

His deepest hope  
and the reason for his words  
was that others might know  
that grace as well;  
That they might know  
the freedom of those being released  
from the spiritual prison  
of our own making.

That they might know  
in their hearts  
the greatest thing in all existence –  
God's loving grace and gracious love.

So with deep affection,  
for his fellow Christians,  
he wrote,  
*Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

When Paul wrote these words, I am virtually certain he knew the words of our Lord Jesus himself, "My peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you. I do not give as the world gives." Remember Jesus said these words of grace right *before* Peter would deny him, the rest of his friends would abandon him, and one of them would betray him to the cross. Indeed, Jesus does not give as the world gives.

Our world is thrashing about with hatred, judgement, division, and fear,  
as seen in the social media frenzies  
because it is deprived  
of the life-giving,  
joy-imparting,

peace-bestowing,  
breath of Christ,  
supercharged,  
grace-filled,  
love in our hearts.

And every Sunday we aim to fill ourselves up with grace so we can bring it to the world.

Some of you might wonder why each week in worship we hit the pause button to greet one another. But that's not what we are doing in the *Passing of the Peace*. It is meant to be a moment utterly beyond politics, ethnicity, class or religion. It is a moment when our hope for the other's life, to be filled with the best things in this universe, is conveyed in those few simple words.

In this moment, we are sharing our yearning for our brothers and sisters that whatever is happening in their lives – be it illness, loss, confusion, weariness, apathy, sin, loneliness – that they might know the surprising grace through encountering the Peace of Christ.

Each week in worship when we extend those words of peace to each other  
we should look one another in the eye,  
while clasping hands,  
and opening our heart to its fullest measure,  
while considering the deep love God gave to us  
up on that the cross,  
the profound peace  
of knowing Christ in our heart  
and, in the few words spoken,  
*"The Peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you"*  
offer it all to them.