

Pastor's Note

Hello

We've been talking about the character of God. As we looked at God's holiness and justice I used concrete examples from the Word of God to demonstrate aspects of God's character. Last week we looked at mercy. My intent in this series is to expand our knowledge of why our understanding of God's character matters. I want us to see where God is headed with all of this from the perspective of God's overall plan. I want us to get the big picture. I want us to understand God's character and how it works. I want us to understand that we were designed and created with that same character. I want us to understand that we became separated from God and over time we took on the character of the world we lived in. I want us to understand that God knew all of this was going to happen and He put a plan in place from the very beginning to teach us His character. We desperately need to understand who God is and what He is doing if we are going to understand our very purpose for existing. What has God been doing with the human race over time and how can we tell if those actions have led to us taking on His character? Let's look at grace.

God has always been and he will always be. In his time; he decided that he wanted a family and he created the universe, the world, and all the things in it for the express purpose of creating you and me. Geneses 1:2 says, "*He saw that it was good.*" Listen, the Word of God is alive and it has power. Scripture says it will not return void. That means that whenever a scripture from the Bible is read it will have an effect. That is the power of God's word. We were spoken into creation through the power of God's words. I really want us to get this today. I want all of us to have a deep understanding of just who God is and how awesome His creation is. We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

God gave us the ability to choose and as he knew would happen, we made and continue to make wrong choices that separate us from God and diminish our spiritual lives. But God's gift of grace is greater than all our wrong choices. Because we were created in God's image and He designed us for a living relationship with him. Nothing else can satisfy our soul-not money, not sex, and not power. The central theme of the Bible is the story of God calling us into the relationship for which we were created. Jesus calls on all of us to accept the relationship God offers in Luke 19:10 He says, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what*

was lost." Through grace, God offers us a personal relationship of self-giving love, not a system of rules and regulations.

Ephesians 1:11 says this, *"It is in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for... part of the overall purpose He is working out in everything and everyone."* And Colossians 1:16 says, *"Everything, absolutely everything... got started in Him and finds its purpose in Him."* God's master plan is being worked out on this earth right now through His grace. Grace is most commonly defined as the undeserved favor of God. We can't earn it for ourselves but God gives it to us anyway. Listen to what the apostle Paul says about Grace in his letter to the church in Rome. Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 10:9 *"...if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*

Romans 9:16 *"So then, it does not depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."*

We need God's grace to have a relationship with God because when we accept God's grace, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross covers our mistakes and makes us clean in God's eyes. Because of the properties of holiness, God cannot allow evil into heaven because heaven is Holy and unspoiled, it's perfect, it's paradise. The property of holiness is key to understanding why we can't get into paradise without God's grace. Holiness is what keeps a perfect place, perfect. If a bunch of garbage got dumped on your perfect place it wouldn't be perfect anymore would it? It's the same with heaven, and the property of holiness keeps heaven perfect because it will not allow any garbage in. Our mistakes are like the garbage being dumped on your perfect place and God can't have a relationship with us or let us into paradise until we're cleaned up.

But the problem is, we can't clean ourselves. Trying to do enough good to make up for our mistakes just doesn't work. The mistakes are still there. Galatians 5:9 says, *"A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough."* This very problem is why God came up with His plan to clean us up so we can have a relationship with Him and we can enjoy paradise for eternity, no matter what we have done. That plan is Jesus Christ sacrificing Himself on the cross to pay the price for our mistakes, yours and mine. All we have to do is confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised Him from the dead and Jesus will take our mistakes and cover us so that God sees us as clean. We don't deserve it. There is no way we can earn it. But God implemented His plan

anyway. Remember we talked about the difference between mercy and justice.

Two societies; two penalties for stealing a loaf of bread. Both are just. The difference is mercy. Like justice and mercy, Grace is similar to mercy but not the same thing. I've told this story before. There were two boys that grew up together, played sports together through school and were always close friends. After college they entered their own careers. One became a lawyer and the other an investment advisor. They didn't really see each other much because of life and career commitments they each had, and they lost contact. Later in life the investment advisor got into some questionable financial dealings and was arrested for misappropriating some funds for personal gain. When he went to court he was surprised to see that the judge assigned to hear his case was in fact his childhood friend. The precedent for this type of case dictated that the penalty for the crime demanded a fine of \$50,000.

The investment advisor began to hope that his friend would show mercy and find him not guilty or at least show mercy and reduce the fine if he were found guilty. The judge knew that he was morally obligated to decide the case so that justice would be upheld, so he found his friend guilty and fined him the \$50,000. Then he immediately stood up, took off his robes and walked to the clerk of courts desk where he took out his checkbook and wrote a personal check for \$50,000 and paid his friend's penalty. In a situation where mercy was not an option, he paid the penalty that justice required himself. That's grace. In life God often shows us mercy and he always offers to give us grace through Jesus Christ. With mercy we are still subject to justice, the penalty is just easier. With grace we are still subject to justice, but Jesus pays the penalty for us. That's the difference between mercy and grace.

We've been following God's plan through the biblical story of the Israelites, the incubator God created to begin moving humanity in the direction we were designed and created to live in. And slowly over the past 4000 plus years we have taken on God's character. Little by little, generation by generation, two steps forward, one step back; the Judeo-Christian path has moved us ever closer to God's character. We are currently in what we would call the Christianity phase of the plan. Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship, a way of life. It is God's plan to reach out to his creation and bring them into relationship with Him.

Listen, by definition, religion is always an attempt by humanity to reach God. If you pray so many times per day facing the right direction you

may find God. If you do enough good deeds you may find God. If you meditate long enough you may find God. If you get in touch with your karma you may find God. All of these are examples from religious movements started by men who were trying to reach God; they each came up with a set of criteria or rules that, if followed, would supposedly allow you to find God. These are not God's plan. Religion is not God's plan. Religion can be defined as man's attempts to reach God. Christianity is God's plan to save humanity; God reaching out to you and me and bringing us into relationship with Him.

Again, we need grace to have a relationship with God because when we accept God's grace, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross covers our mistakes and makes us clean in God's eyes. We become justified before God. When you accept Christ in your life it's just as if you never sinned. I became justified and God sees me just if I'd never sinned. We don't deserve it. There is no way we can earn it. But God implemented the plan anyway. That's grace.

When we accept God's offer of grace and say yes to Jesus, his grace is at work in the moment we say yes. Our acceptance changes everything. We are restored to an eternal relationship with Christ who knows and loves us better than we know and love ourselves. We simply believe that Jesus can cover our faults and ask Him to enter our hearts and minds to make it happen. This is our first step in starting a relationship with God. To do this we must believe that if we confess our faults to Jesus, He will cover them for us so that God sees us as clean. God has bridged the gap between good and evil through His son Jesus Christ. Responding to grace is an act of faith. We cannot do anything to earn a relationship with God. We know from biblical teaching that we cannot do enough good things to cover our own mistakes.

Romans 9:16 says, *"So then, it does not depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."*

God's mercy. Not by anything we do but by what Christ did for us on the cross. We cannot do it. But because of God's mercy he designed a plan to give us grace through Jesus Christ so that we are able to have a relationship with Him. Salvation is instantaneous, retroactive and continuous. It is correct to say: I was saved by grace, I am saved by grace, and I will continue being saved by grace. I want us to get our minds around this now; God is omnipresent. He does not exist under the constraints of a linear concept of time. He is at all times, present. When Jesus made His sacrifice on the cross 2000 years ago in our time, it wasn't a single event. The crucifixion, Jesus' triumph over evil, is continuous retroactively

and perpetually. His sacrifice is capable of covering all the sin of this world. All the mistakes that were made before, all the mistakes made since then and, all the mistakes that haven't been made yet.

In scripture, the spiritual experience of receiving God's grace is known as salvation, or conversion, or having one's sins forgiven, or being born again. On the day that you or I decide to accept God's gift of grace and begin a relationship with Jesus Christ, all of the mistakes in our life are covered, all the ones we made up to the point we accepted salvation, and all the ones we're going to make from salvation until we die. God's grace is not constrained by our concept of time. Jesus gave his life to prove God's love for all time. Romans 5:6-8 *"Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn't, and doesn't, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn't been so weak, we wouldn't have known what to do anyway. We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him."*

Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross restored our relationship with God. Our relationship is the beginning of a process; a process where the Holy Spirit comes and begins renewing our minds into the image of Christ. John 16:13 says, *"When the Holy Spirit, who is truth, comes, he shall guide you into all truth..."* Ephesians 4:23 says this, *"Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes."* And Romans 12:2 says, *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..."* This process involves us working with the Holy Spirit as we come to understand ourselves better and acknowledge our continual need for Christ. And we come to understand God's character better and take on God's character in our lives.

Grace is a double acceptance. God says yes to us in creation and again in the cross. Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, thus proving God's unconditional love and acceptance of us. When we say yes to the relationship God offers us in Christ, God addresses our intellect; we respond in faith. Faith is a reasonable response to God's revelation. God appeals to our wills and by grace we are free to choose. God does not dictate our response; it is a free decision, an act of the will. As God touches our hearts and we respond with love and enthusiasm, we learn to trust and listen to the Holy Spirit. Saving faith is the foundation of doing the right thing, not the result of them.

We often times think that we aren't good enough or deserving of God's love and so we work at trying to be good to win God's approval or so that we can be good enough to do something for God. Here's a great piece of advice my friends, Stop wasting your time and quit making God wait while you try and fix your life. You will never be good enough because there will always be another thing to fix. But God can use you right where you are, right now. It is within the process of doing the things that God calls us to do, that we are conformed into the image of Christ. And just so you know, God does not want a bunch of groveling people coming to Him whining about how, we're not worthy. We don't deserve forgiveness. We're just a bunch of worthless sinners. God I'll do what you say because I'm afraid you'll crush me if I don't.

Of course we're not worthy, of course we don't deserve it, of course we're sinners, of course we don't measure up, and of course God could crush us if He wanted to. But God did not send His son to die for us to live that way. We need to walk in the gift that He has given us. We are justified through the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We respond to God's grace by saying, "Thank you God for giving me the righteousness of Christ even though I don't deserve it, thank you God for giving me the self-worth to hold my head up and know that you love me, thank you God for forgiving me, and thank for showing me that you do not want to crush me but you want my life to have purpose." You and I have been justified through the blood of Jesus Christ. I want you to say in your mind right now, "I am justified through the blood of Jesus Christ."

We were made in God's image and God does not go around sniveling and groveling. Neither does God go around filled with pride. God is humble and we also should be humble. "God I confess that all of the power and righteousness that I have come from you. I walk in the knowledge that I could never achieve these things on my own and I live to show you how grateful I am for teaching me who I am. I am your child and I can walk in confidence, justified by grace."

The disciples experienced this life-giving grace and invite us to receive it as well. The mission of every believer, once they have accepted God's justifying grace, is to join in God's mission and make disciples of Jesus Christ. Spiritual disciplines are a faithful response to justifying grace; as we follow the spiritual practices of Christ, we become more like Jesus. We serve because we love God and it is a justifiable response to his love for us. We do what God asks us to do out of our love and obedience to him and not because we are good enough.

At some point in our relationship with God we have to stop focusing on us and really focus on how much God loves us and what he did to prove it. I am so glad that I woke up and realized just what I am here for. God wants us to understand how important we are to him and that he didn't create us and make the ultimate sacrifice for us so we could sit around and wait until we become good enough to acknowledge and accept the relationship he has to offer. The creator of everything; the almighty God has justified us and he wants to share life with us. We are justified through the blood of Christ and God accepts us as clean. And he is ready to take us to a whole new level of relationship if we'll just step out and walk in the grace he has given us.

Blessings,

Scott

