

Disarming Grace

Letter to the Colossians

For most of our married life, one of us has wanted to take dancing lessons, and the other one has been so ungracious that they have found all sorts of excuses for saying no. I'll let you work out which one that is. Saying yes to dancing lessons is like earning bonus points. Sort of like matrimonial frequent flier miles. You can cash these in later on. The reason one of us keeps saying no it is that one of us has had experience of trying this thing before. When you have spent the evening watching your feet, trying to count out the time, all the while having your tongue hanging out and going cross-eyed with the effort, you have this feeling that this is not exactly fun. When you feel stiff and awkward, and you know that the instructor is diplomatically saying that the thing that is lacking is grace, it's just hard work. One of us in our marriage is born with rhythm and grace, the other one has difficulty coordinating hands and voice to the actions for "Wide, wide is the ocean".

Grace is really hard to describe, but once you see it you know it. Grace comes out of an overflowing heart. Grace is knowing that in Christ, God has treated you in a way you don't deserve. Treating others with grace is not something you can manufacture. It's something Christ has to do through you. You can know the right thing, you can do the right thing, but the world is so tired of Christians who know the right thing or even do the right thing, but in whom there is no grace. Without Grace, Christianity is a clumsy, awkward business. Without Grace, people get hurt. Without Grace, there is no life.

Grace is the one thing that the church has to offer, that the world can't get anywhere else. You don't have to be a Christian to feed the hungry, to build homes for the homeless, or to donate to charity. Of course, all Christians should do these things. You don't have to be a Christian to effect political change. There are other teachers who offer moral discussions about moral issues. The one thing the church has to offer that the world can't get anywhere else is grace. Where else can the world go to find grace?

In this world it is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. In this world you get what you pay for. You reap what you sow. There is no free lunch. This is not a grace filled world. The world cannot say, once you were lost but now you're found, once you were guilty but now you're pardoned, you were dead, but now you have been made alive.

The ultimate expression of grace is Jesus Christ the Son of God nailed to the Cross. In these passages of scripture I'm going to read in a few minutes, Paul doesn't even use the word grace, but grace permeates everything he is writing about. Here's what he wrote to the Colossian Christians:

"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." (Colossians 2:6 & 7)

Paul uses a series of pictures to describe what grace looks like.

1. Spiritual Circumcision.

For Paul, as a Jew, circumcision was something that marked him off as being part of a special race of people. Yet in verse 11 of Colossians 2, he's talking about a different sort of circumcision. ***"In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ." (Colossians 2:11)*** Paul is talking about a spiritual circumcision. In the Colossian church there were some legalistic people who were trying to convince others that they needed to be circumcised. Paul is saying "It's not necessary – Christ has already done something in your heart – something spiritual – that marks you off as one of his children. He's telling these non Jewish people that they are already part of the people of God. Through what Christ has done on the Cross, and your acceptance of the sacrifice of his life for you, you are now forever part of God's people. It's an act of God's grace.

2. Spiritual Death.

Here's another picture in verse 13. **"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins". (Colossians 2:13)** We were dead to God. We had guilt but no one to forgive us. We had a desire for purpose and significance, but no one to serve. We had fear, but no source of hope. But God has made us alive, and has removed our guilt, given us a sense of purpose and significance, and hope in our hearts. Death no longer has any hold over us. That's the wonder of grace.

3. Spiritual Forgiveness.

Verse 14 is a picture of forgiveness. **"He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross". (Colossians 2:14)** Paul talks about what Christ has done in forgiving us all our sins. He has cancelled the debt that we owed and nailed it to the cross. You and I have run up a huge account with God. The list of our sins is enormous. As a result we have a certificate of indebtedness, or an IOU, that represents the vast moral debt that we owe God. Jesus has taken that certificate of indebtedness and has nailed it to the Cross. He has erased the account. He has ripped up the IOU. We are free. That's the wonder of grace.

4. Spiritual Freedom.

In Verse 15 Paul uses a military picture. In the 1st century, when a Roman General triumphed over an opposing army, he would be allowed to have a parade through the streets of Rome. In Rome they would take the officers and generals of the opposing army, strip them of their weapons, put them in chains, and hook them up to the chariots of the Roman generals. The Roman general would show off his captives in triumph. Paul is saying to these Colossian Christians "That's what happened at the Cross." He says **"And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." (Colossians 2:15)** Jesus disarmed the rulers and principalities, making a public spectacle of them. Somehow, in a way that we don't quite understand, something happened at the cross. Jesus disarmed the rulers and principalities. Every power that has ranged itself against God since the fall - spiritual powers, financial powers, political powers, structural evil - all these have been stripped of their power to cause ultimate harm. The resurrection of Jesus was the beginning of this parade. The parade hasn't finished yet. It hasn't gone past our vantage point. You and I can go out of here with absolute confidence in the victory of Jesus. That's the wonder of grace.

You and I have inherited all that. We have been saved by grace. So how is it that Christians like you and I can say that we have been saved by grace, and yet be such ungracious people? Why do we have such a hard time living in grace?

It has to do with pride. The Bible says that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. One of the CEO's of America's largest companies tells the story of how he pulled into a gas station, and while he was paying for the fuel his wife got to talking to the service station attendant. It turned out that she used to date this guy in high school. As they were driving away in the car, she explained to her husband how she knew this guy. Her husband said to her, "I'll bet you are glad you married me and are not the wife of a service station attendant". She said to her husband, "If I had married him he would have been a CEO and you would have been a service station attendant."

Have you ever thought of how the story of the prodigal son would have sounded if it was told without grace? In this version of the prodigal son, the father would go to the elder brother, and reward the elder brother for his faithfulness. He would put the ring on the elder brother's finger, kill the fatted calf and put on a party, and put the robe around the elder brother's shoulders. There is something in us that says that's the way that story should have been told. You get the love of your father by earning it. That story sounds right to human ears, but it's not God's grace. Grace is getting what we don't deserve.

How Do We Live In Grace?

Having been saved by it, how do we live in it?

1. We Must Live Close To The Cross.

We need to really engage in self examination and confession. We need to be reminded regularly that it's my IOU that is nailed to the cross. Have you ever noticed that when you are intensely aware of your own fallenness, it's hard to be judgmental about other people? When I am aware of my own need for grace, I am much more gracious towards other people. When I am on my knees before the cross, it's a lot easier to be gracious towards other people.

2. We Need To Stay Close To Grace Providing People.

We all need some people who will accept us and love us no matter what. Grace providers. We need these sort of people because every one of us have other people in our lives who are grace impaired people. They judge us. They have the gift of being able to see what's wrong with us, and then have another gift of being able to tell others what it is that's wrong with us. We need people who will provide grace in our lives. People who will speak the truth to us. People who observe things about us and who love us enough to talk to us about those things. People who are for us. People who celebrate the good things in our lives with us. People who love us even though they see the dark things in us that would repel others.

3. We Need To Stay Close To Sinful People Who Need Grace And Extend It To Them.

All around us are people who need grace. Get around people are lost, who don't know God, people who would never darken the door of a church, people who are confused, people who sin. Do what Jesus did and get around people like that and extend grace to them. Share your life and your heart and your faith with them. Love them. This is what Jesus loved to do most. He loved to extend grace to people who knew they didn't deserve it. You know what? It got Him into trouble all the time. But he kept doing it. Jesus is still looking for people who will extend grace to others.

Tony Campolo is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Eastern University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of 34 books and is one of the most respected evangelical leaders in America. He tells the story of a time when he was on holiday in Hawaii. Because his internal time clock was all out through travelling, he woke up at three o'clock in the morning. He was hungry and couldn't sleep so he went down to the local diner on the street. While he was eating his food, in walked about 8 prostitutes, smoking, swearing, and talking loudly. The woman next to him, whose name was Agnes, says to her friend, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." To which her friend nastily replies, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?" The first woman says, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to put me down? I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When they all left, Tony Campolo asked the man who ran the diner "Do they come here every night?" He said "Yes they do." So Campolo said "I'd like to throw a birthday party for Agnes tomorrow night." The guy behind the counter called his wife out and the three of them discussed together how they would put on a birthday party for Agnes. They decided to decorate the place and Harry, the man behind the counter, offered to make a cake. By 2.30 the next morning they began decorating the diner, and by 3.30am the word had got out on the street and a whole crowd of prostitutes had gathered. Tony said it felt like every prostitute in Hawaii had come to share Agnes's birthday party.

On the dot of 3.30am Agnes came in with her friend. Tony Campolo, the Christian pastor, led a whole bunch of prostitutes in shouting happy birthday to Agnes. She was so shocked that her mouth fell open and her legs buckled from underneath her. After they had sung happy birthday to her and bought out the birthday cake with all the candles, Agnes just lost it and cried. When it came time for her to cut the cake, she asked if she could keep it and take it home rather than cut it up. Then she picked up the cake, walked out the door and took it home. There was such a stunned silence that Tony Campolo didn't know what to do so he said "What say I pray?" He said it just felt like the right thing to do.

With all the prostitutes gathered around, Tony prayed for salvation for Agnes and that her life would be changed. He prayed that God would be good to her. After the prayer was finished, Harry, the guy behind the counter, leaned over and said "Hey, you never told me you are a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" Tony Campolo says his response was inspired by the Holy Spirit. He said "I belong to a church that throws parties for prostitutes at 3.30 in the morning." Harry said, "No you don't, there's no church like that. If there was I would join it."

There is no wonder in the world like the wonder of extending grace to a person who desperately needs it. There is no wonder in the world like seeing someone who was lost who now is found, someone who is dead but is now alive.

Let me ask you. Who are you bringing to the party? Somebody in your world is desperately waiting for an invitation of grace. Somebody in your workplace is just waiting for you to start a conversation of grace. Somebody in your university is looking for a grace filled person like you. Somebody in your school has never known what it means to be treated with grace. Somebody where you get your haircut or where you buy your petrol is waiting for someone to offer them grace. Somebody who is dead in their guilt and sin is just one invitation away from Gods party. You and I have the one thing in the world to offer people that they can't get anywhere else in the world, and that's grace.

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