

AMAZING GRACE

I remember Tony Campolo telling the story of a time he was travelling and saw a little girl all dressed up at the airport who kept saying "I'm going to see my daddy". She was so happy until motion sickness caught up with her and she got sick all over herself. Campolo waited around to watch the reunion. When the father saw his little girl he saw beyond the filth and embraced her anyway. Likewise God sees beyond the filth in our lives and sees only the child He loves. This is grace.

Grace is unmerited favor. As a kid I learned that the word GRACE means GOD'S RICHES AT CHRIST'S EXPENSE. It means getting something that you don't deserve. It is a gift given from the heart of the giver. You can't earn it or deserve it. You just accept it.

An example of grace is seen in the life of Mephibosheth. Saul was chosen as king but had been disobedient to God and had died in battle with his son Jonathan. There was a conflict between the house of Saul and that of David, who was God's anointed. It was often the case in the ancient world that when a new dynasty replaced an old one the entire family of the previous king would be killed so that no future leader would be left to make a claim to the throne. With this in mind we read:

2 Samuel 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.

After many years of conflict David takes his rightful place as God's anointed on the throne as king. The nation has expanded and it is a time of peace and prosperity in the nation. Almost 20 years later we again hear about Jonathan's son:

2 Samuel 9:3 The king asked, "Is there no-one still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show God's kindness?" Ziba answered the king, "There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in both feet." 4 "Where is he?" the king asked. Ziba answered, "He is at the house of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar." 5 So King David had him brought from Lo Debar, from the house of Makir son of Ammiel. 6 When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, came to David, he bowed down to pay him honor. David said, "Mephibosheth!", "Your servant," he replied. 7 "Don't be afraid," David said to him, "for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table." 8 Mephibosheth bowed down and said, "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?"

1. Grace Required – our need

Out of the overflow that David had received from the Lord, he wanted to bless someone else. Likewise out of the abundance of love in the heart of God all things were created.

Ephesians 1:4 Long before He laid down the earth's foundation, He had us in His mind and settled on us as the focus of His love to be made whole and holy by His love. (Message)

We are the focus of God's love. God made you to love you. You were created to be loved by God. That is why you exist. That is why you were born. It is why you are here this morning drawing air into your lungs. God created you to love you.

God didn't need you. He wanted you. He wasn't lonely. He made you because He is love. You have to understand that this is what you are on earth for – you are here to be loved by God. We have value and worth not because of what we have done but because of who we were created. Our value is based in who God is and who God created us to be.

Even though God created us to love us and gave us worth and value, we have chosen to devalue and tarnish what we have been given. Ziba had been a servant of Saul and knew about Mephibosheth who had been living his whole life in fear in Lo Debar. In Hebrew this means "not a pasture." It is a dry and barren place. Can you imagine the pain, poverty, fear and state of mind in which he lived?

We all know what it is to have broken relationships, especially with God. Even though we were created to be loved by God, we have all turned from God and in doing so our relationship with Him has been shattered. In running we have been wounded and crippled by sin. Each of us has inherited a fallen sin nature that we must live with on a daily basis. Like Paul we strive to please God but often end up doing the things we hate and not doing the things we should. We separate ourselves from God and live alone in a dry and barren place trying to hide from Him.

Have you ever been to Lo Debar? I am not talking about the place but the experience. In 1987 I was working for the Yonge St. Mission in Downtown Toronto. In the mornings I would hand out food at the food bank and in the afternoons I would go out and try to reach out to the street kids. One day I went out for lunch to a nearby restaurant. It was a hot day and I wanted to go inside but I felt the Lord telling me to sit outside so I got a table next to the street. As I was waiting to order a homeless man came by and asked me for a dollar. Seeing he was in bad shape I told him he needed more than a dollar and invited him to have lunch with me.

The waiter came and took our orders. I ordered a sandwich. I told the homeless man he could order whatever he wanted so he said "I'll have the biggest steak you have!" I gulped, wondering if I had the money to cover it. When the waiter left we began to talk and he told me his story. His name was Ray and he came from Newfoundland. He had been married and happy. One day he took his only son to the beach for a swim. As he watched an undertow took his son out into the ocean. He could not swim so all he could do is sit there and watch his son die. His wife blamed him for the death and left him. He hit rock bottom and eventually lost everything he owned and found himself a hopeless drunk living in an abandoned dumpster in a back alley in downtown Toronto.

Was there ever a time in your life when you like Ray hit rock bottom? I lived in Kuwait for 10 years so I know what it is to like to live in a barren place. I also know that my life without Jesus would have been a lot like that. I came to Christ when I was quite young, so I did not lived in Lo Debar long – but spiritually I have visited there.

Maybe you are in Lo Debar today. You have run from God and find yourself in a dry and deserted place in your spiritual life. Take heart – God is calling you home. He wants to bless you.

2. Grace Received – our decision

When made to appear before King David, Mephibosheth feared for his life! His grandfather had done much to oppose David. Instead of revenge, David gave grace and granted to Mephibosheth all that belonged to his grandfather Saul including Zeba and his family as servants.

Through our relationship with God's son Jesus we have grace which brings us into the throne room of God with acceptance and the invitation to eat at God's table. All the riches of God are made available to us at no charge since Christ has paid it all. All we need to do is receive it.

J. Wilbur Chapman went through a difficult time in ministry and his finances were almost depleted just when it was necessary for him to take a long trip to the western United States. One of the elders of his church who was a wealthy banker came to his home to offer a word of comfort and encouragement. As he left, he slipped a piece of paper into the pastor's hand. Chapman looked at it and was surprised to find that it was a check made out to him and signed by this rich friend. But the figures to indicate the amount of the gift were missing. "Did you really mean to give me a signed blank check?" he asked. "Yes," said the man. "I didn't know how much you'd need, and I wanted to be sure you would have enough." Later Chapman commented, "While I never had to use that check, it gave me a secure feeling to know that thousands of dollars were literally at my disposal."

Let me get back to my story of Ray. While we were waiting for the food I asked him if he had ever been to church and he said "God could never forgive me for what I have done. God could forgive a nice kid like you, but not me." He pointed his finger at me and said with great emotion "Listen to me kid and understand this - nothing in life is free". As soon as those words had left his mouth the food arrived. He looked down at his plate and said "what's this?" I told him it was his food. He said, "I thought you were just kidding when you said I could order anything". He dove into that food like a man who had never eaten in his life.

As we were finishing and I was waiting for the bill he said "I am a lucky man. I came down this street today looking for a dollar and got a free steak dinner!" I told him it wasn't free – it is just that he did not have to pay for it! Suddenly it seemed that a light went on inside. He finally understood. Salvation and forgiveness was not free but a gift purchased by Jesus. There at the table we bowed our heads and I lead him in a prayer to receive Jesus as savior.

3. Grace Returned – our response

Mephibosheth could not understand why David had shown grace and so he says "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like". In other words "why me"? Many of us respond to the grace of God in the same way, we question it. We push it away. This is the wrong way to handle grace. It is possible to be given grace but not to receive it. Like the gift of salvation, grace is a gift that must be received to make a difference in your life.

Heb 12:15 See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

Remember the story in Matt 18 of the servant who was forgiven a great debt. Even though he had received grace he failed to extend grace to a fellow servant. He had missed it. How do you know if you have truly understood and received God's grace? There are 2 right and natural responses:

a. Returned to God - thankfulness

We read in this passage that Mephibosheth was not only given all of Saul's property and servants but he was also brought into the place to eat at David's table.

If I was Mephibosheth I do not think I would have complained a great deal at the King's table. If they brought me scrambled eggs for breakfast I would not have thrown them back demanding over easy. I would be sitting there just feeling blessed to be in at the king's table. I would have just been happy to be allowed to be there! How about you?

Having mom take us to Disney. You don't complain about the lines when someone else is paying!

In Christ we have been given so much. Then why is it Christians seem to complain so much about what they have? The issue is thankfulness. Nothing you receive in life will be treated with care and value except when you are thankful for it. This includes grace.

I remember buying my first car. It was a 1980 Pontiac Acadian. It was old and slow and ugly but I loved that car because I had bought it with my own money. I called it Flash and we had many great adventures together. One day my friend bought a new car and gave me a chance to drive it. I noticed that it did not smell like my car. It was faster and people looked at me differently behind the wheel of it. After a half hour drive I went back to Flash but something had changed. I was no longer happy with it and sold it a few months later. What had changed? I had. I was no longer thankful for it.

A man writing at the post office desk was approached by an older fellow who had a post card in his hand. The old man said, "Sir, could you please address this post card for me?" The man gladly did so, and he agreed to write a short message on the post card, and he even signed it for the man, too. Finally the man doing the writing said to the older man, "Now, is there anything else I can do for you?" The old fellow thought about it for a minute, and he said, "Yes, at the end could you just put, 'P.S. Please excuse the sloppy handwriting.'"

A famous English Bible scholar named Matthew Henry was once attacked by thieves and robbed of his purse. He wrote these words in his diary: "Let me be thankful. First, I was never robbed before. Second, although they took my purse, they didn't take my life. Third, although they took my all, it was not much. Fourth, let me be thankful because it was I who was robbed and not I who did the robbing."

Alexander Whyte, the Scottish preacher, always began his prayers with an expression of gratitude. One cold, miserable day his people wondered what he would say. He prayed, "We thank Thee, O Lord, that it is not always like this."

b. Returned to others - passing it on through outreach

Those who are shown grace are called to be givers of grace. We give what we have received and pour into the hearts of others what God has poured into ours. This should be an integral part of who we are and the natural expression of what is within us.

God calls us to be a people of grace. That means in the church but also outside it. It means that there is an attitude of gratitude in everything we say and do. We seek to extend that attitude of grace to everyone we meet.

What makes Christianity different than other religions? That question was discussed at a conference years ago. Some argued that Christianity is unique because it teaches that God became man. No, other religions teach similar doctrines. What about the resurrection?

No, other faiths believe that the dead rise again. The discussion grew heated. Then C. S. Lewis, a strong defender of Christianity, came in late and asked what the discussion was about. When he learned that it was a debate about the uniqueness of Christianity, he immediately commented, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

The greatest thing we can offer the community around us is grace. We invite people to come as they are without judging them. We invite them to join us at the table. We invite them to become part of the family.

In the days of the American Revolutionary War there lived at Ephrata, Pennsylvania, a Baptist pastor by the name of Peter Miller who enjoyed the friendship of General Washington. There also dwelt in that town one Michael Wittman, an evil-minded man who did all in his power to abuse and oppose this pastor. One day Michael Wittman was involved in treason and was arrested and sentenced to death. The old preacher started out on foot and walked the whole seventy miles to Philadelphia to plead for this man's life. He was admitted into Washington's presence and at once begged for the life of the traitor. Washington said, "No, Peter, I cannot grant you the life of your friend." The preacher exclaimed, "My friend, he is the bitterest enemy I have." Washington cried, "What? You've walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in a different light. I will grant the pardon." And he did. And Peter Miller took Michael Wittman from the very shadow of death back to his own home in Ephrata -- no longer as an enemy, but as a friend.