

He Asked About Grace

The Chinese have their Year of the Dog, Year of the Fish — I've chosen to make this church year the Year of the Question, inviting you to request sermons on special topics. You are responding so well that I am already set up for the next two or three months, including the question I shall try to answer this morning. One of you, who has enjoyed the old gospel song "Amazing Grace" and who knows how important a place the word *grace* has in Christian scripture, wants me to talk about it: what does it mean, in a religious sense, and is it an idea peculiar to Christianity?

One meaning of grace is elegance and beauty in movement or manners. We speak of the extraordinary grace of an athlete like Michael Jordan or a woman like Jackie Kennedy. But we also use the word to mean unexpected and undeserved good will shown to us by another person, especially one who has some power over us. "It was only through the Dean's good grace," we say, "that she wasn't expelled from school." This is how the word is used in Christian scripture, over and over, to suggest the unmerited love of God shown in the life of Christ and in the power of that life to make us happy. In other world religions, the gods reward people for doing well, but I think the emphasis on God's grace as a gift beyond anything we deserve is unique to Christianity.

Although some of its later writers hint at the idea of grace, most of the early Jewish scripture shows a God quick to punish mistakes, whether deliberate or made in ignorance. Touch an object that is taboo and God

strikes you dead. Curse your parents, and by God's law you are stoned to death. Bow down to a different god, and you die. Violate a certain law, even with innocent motive, and the Old Testament God demands your hand be cut off. Through the centuries the laws expand until there are over 600 of them, often harsh and inflexible. If you walk half-starved through a grainfield on the Sabbath, you don't break off the heads and rub away the husks in your hands and eat, because that is work, and work is forbidden on the Sabbath. On that day you walk only so far, even if your mother is sick and lives a mile beyond the limit. Fear keeps you in line. Fear works of course. It may keep you from hurting yourself, or hurting someone else, but there can be a higher and better motivation than fear. Let me try for an explanation:

My father and mother loved me to the limit of human possibility, I think, but as a child I behaved at first more out of fear of some discipline than out of a glad response to their love. On those occasions when my father punished me he often said, "This hurts me more than it does you," but at the time all I could think was, "Then why not quit and make us both happy!" If I had known in those days how to behave from love rather than from fear, I would not have shot that rubber-tipped arrow at the preacher one night in a tent meeting. If I had understood love I would have said, "Bobby, you can't do this because it will grieve and embarrass the one man in this whole world who loves you best." If I had behaved from that motive, I would have taken a step up in building character. Even if I had been ruled by a lesser motive — of fear — I would at least have been deterred. But like many who behave only out of fear, I took a chance on getting away with it.

By and by I began to understand some things: that no matter what choices I made, how far away I lived from my parents, how often I forgot some simple kindness, their love did not — could not — waver. The grace they had given me was unconditional love. I could grieve them, even make them angry with some foolishness, but they were always ready with love and forgiveness. And so, inevitably, my response to their love began to change me. I began to repay my dad in ways the law did not require, but love demanded. Through some 30 years when Mom lived alone, I went to see her not out of fear of God or my father's ghost, but from an impulse of my own heart. No law said I had to do it. No one would punish me. And when I was away from her, in addition to the other calls there was a ritual Sunday morning call to see how she was and to say I loved her. Not because there were telephone police checking to see if I were acting like a son, but out of the promptings of a heart moved at last by how much love she had shown to me.

There had been a lifetime of her generous grace, that unmerited favor she showed to a child who was not always grateful. I came to know that I did not earn, could never earn, all she did: the years of reading to me, seeing I ate well and learned cleanliness, sitting up all night by my bed if I were sick, singing her song of faith in what I could become, rejoicing in my success, lifting me when I stumbled. (Are you remembering your own childhood for a moment?) How do we earn such love? We can't even repay it, because by the time we are old enough to understand what we have been given, it's too late to repay it — there won't be enough time — and the only partial repayment you can make is to show the same kind of love to your own children or to somebody

else. “Grow in grace,” Paul said over and over to his churches. I am finally beginning to understand what he means.

It can help to understand the meaning of grace if you contrast it for a moment with justice. Justice deals with us according to what we deserve and it is a noble concept in itself, especially to someone who has lived under a tyrant. If I displease a tyrant I suffer whether what I did was legal or not. Justice protects us from utter helplessness, and says I suffer only if I break the law. But the thing called “grace” goes far beyond this.

Remember these words? “He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good. He sends rain on the just and on the unjust alike.” We like this idea, of course, when it works to our advantage. If it doesn’t we grumble,

“What have I done to deserve this?” How many times do you hear someone pause in the midst of some good

fortune say, “What have I done to be so favored?” Every life is filled with blessings that came by luck or

through the love of others....which means that every life is hallowed by grace. Old Dr. Samuel Johnson

understood it. On the last birthday of his life, at 75, with only 3 more months to live, he wrote a prayer whose

constant refrain was: “O my gracious God.” The surest road to happiness is being grateful....and being grateful

is an acknowledgement of the grace showered over and over upon your life. So little of it comes by merit: your

very existence, your health and energy, the nurturing love of parents, loyal friends — so much of all that, a gift.

Emerson recognized it: “My friends have come to me unsought,” he said. “The great God gave them to me.”

It’s a good way to feel.

Now, for a moment, let's return to the idea of grace as one of the hallmarks of Christian faith. The word is a constant motif in the writings of Paul. He cannot stop marveling at what has happened to him. "To me," he says, "who am the least of all the apostles, is this grace given: that I should get to preach the unsearchable riches of the gospel of Christ." I could never have been good enough, never kept enough laws, to deserve such a gift, he says in letter after letter. Some of his friends missed the point, or pretended to. "Well," they said, "if God is going to cover our mistakes with His grace, then why shouldn't we make even more of them so that he can pour out even more of it?" Paul's response was that if they really understood the love of God they could never be that self-centered or calculating. Paul knew that in keeping all the external details of religious law he had been absolutely faultless....and yet something had been missing until he came face to face with a new idea in religion: that we never create the character God wants simply by keeping rules, but by responding so gladly to His love that our goodness is born out of gratitude and not out of fear. Such a response to love makes one do more, not less, than the law allows. As a modern Christian, G. K. Chesterton, says about grace: "It is the highest and holiest of the paradoxes that the person who really knows he cannot pay his debt will be forever paying it."

Theologians write books about the concept of grace, so these few minutes make only a simple beginning, but I can tell you a story that works for me as well as anything I know. We are helped to define things by considering their opposites: to know cold is to understand warmth better, to know evil is to know more fully the meaning of good, and to know something called "legalism" is to appreciate the divine gift of grace. Many years

ago, in a religious forum in Dallas, I tried to explain grace by telling a story about legalism gone to seed. I may have mentioned it to some of you in a class once, or perhaps in a sermon, but if so please forgive a repetition because this audience is forever changing, and because I know of no better way to answer a question about the meaning of grace. I will change the names in this absolutely true story because some of you would recognize the family.

One day, many years ago, a member of that family called me to say that the youngest child, Rick, who was away at college, had just phoned them with terrible news. He had found a lump in his leg one evening, in the course of an idle bull session in his dorm room, and when it did not go away he had had it checked. It proved to be malignant and spreading. That year was a long one for Rick and his family, and for me as their minister. Never much concerned with formal religion, Rick was optimistic at first but the cancer spread to the lymph nodes and he began to realize not just that he might die at 20 but that he almost certainly would. When the cancer invaded his lungs he was terrified at the thought of death by suffocation, and he asked me to come more and more often to be with him and give what comfort I could.

One day, too weak by then to sit up in bed, he surprised me by wanting to speak of religion for the first time. He was clearly afraid about something. "If I were to die tonight, would I go to hell forever?" The shocked surprise in my face made him hurry his explanation: "You see, I haven't been baptized yet." I looked at the wasted body that had been so young and strong a year before, and at his eyes bright and staring with cold

fear, and I thought of the God of grace I had come to believe in. It wasn't the time to share my ideas about the concept of hell, but I had to do something. Never in my life had I wished more for the power to say the right words.

“Rick, you must try to believe above all else that God is a God of love, and that his love is wiser and deeper and more forgiving than any love we can ever feel ourselves. He knows your heart, and its longing. He is gracious to forgive and accept. His arms are around you this very moment and they will stay around you, night and day. You don't have to be afraid. You are caught up in his love. I promise.” His face relaxed, he closed his eyes. “Thanks. I'm all right.”

Later that day I learned the reason for his sudden terror. A much-publicized evangelist for our fundamentalist church had come into town for a gospel meeting, and someone who knew Rick's family had mentioned to him that it would probably impress and please the family if he paid Rick a visit. The family had not desired a visit from a stranger, but their decency made them vulnerable, and so when the preacher showed up they made him welcome in Rick's hospital room and went outside to give them some privacy. The evangelist asked Rick if he had been baptized, making it clear from his face and tone that all the Law and the Prophets hung upon the answer. Rick said, “No, sir,” and his visitor said, “Son, you must know, surely, having grown up in a church-going family like yours, that if you die unbaptized you will spend eternity in hell. You

need to obey this command of God's right now, before it's too late, so you won't have to be afraid of meeting God when you die." His duty done, the man prayed briefly that Rick would heed the message.

Rick, a nice boy with little depth in faith or theology, turned the advice over in his mind a few times in the middle of the long nights when the dark and shuddering fears would come, and one morning after a fit of coughing he begged his family to call me, the evangelist having gone on his way. We had the conversation I have described, and I thought the idea of God's grace had won and had brought him peace of mind, but a few weeks later, as death began to breathe in his face, he panicked and asked his family to have me come to the hospital to immerse him. He scarcely seemed to understand what baptism was, exactly, except that it was a kind of magic which could relieve him of fears of hell. I told the family I would do whatever would help Rick feel at peace, and I began making arrangements with the hospital staff to perform a baptism.

It was not to be easy. We needed the loan of a huge steel tank of water in the physical therapy department, wide and deep enough to accommodate Rick on his stretcher, and we needed to find a way to lower him into the tank with the slowest and gentlest of movements. But first we had to get him out of bed, on the top floor, and onto a gurney for the trip to the basement. When we tried to pick him up from his bed, even the lifting of an arm or a leg caused him excruciating pain. He screamed so loudly that those of us around his bed lost both will and strength, and had to stop and start over several times. By the time we had Rick securely on the gurney, his screams had hushed the whole hospital floor and left him exhausted and soaked in sweat. We

got him onto the elevator at last, each small bump in the floor sending him into new spasms of pain. I thought he would faint — or worse — before we could get him downstairs, and a fantasy of how delightful it might be to drown the evangelist who caused all this suffering passed briefly through my head. When we reached the physical therapy room we had to do it all over again, lifting Rick off the gurney and onto the sling that would swivel him out over the tank and lower him into the water. Even the experienced and tough therapy workers winced at Rick's screaming, and then stood back to watch in silent fascination while he did what the preacher had said he must do to win the favor of God.

Once on the sling, he rested for a moment and caught his breath. Somehow the moment had to be hallowed, so I said something religious in the hope that the words would keep us from being oppressed by the bars and the pulleys, the slings and the weights — all that gleaming stainless steel of 20th century technology — and then the mechanical arm, prompted by somebody's finger on a red button, swung Rick out over the tank, cranked him down until he was all the way under the water (because that's how it had to be done in Rick's church), and then — while he spasmed on the canvas sling, cranked him back up. Weak as he was, he had not been able to keep the water out of his mouth, and he came up strangled and close to drowning. Some of the technicians left the room.

Rick died a few days later. His grave is across the street from the university where I taught for so many years. One sunny day, years after, I walked over and found it, and there beside his simple marker I told myself

again that no God I wanted to worship could have been pleased by the awful cost of that day, when inflexible legalism had made it impossible for a child to claim the freedom and the glory of grace....grace promised without limit by a God who knows our hearts, who takes the intention for the deed when we are beyond the doing, and whose grace comes to meet and welcome the prodigal child who has set his face toward home. It is, my beloved friends, the best hope any of us have.

We can never be good enough to deserve the love shown to us, gracious God, but in

our grateful response to it, we can become better -through Christ our Lord. Amen.