

A meal where all are welcome

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Preacher: Colin Strudwick

[0 : 00] Grace is double-edged. On the one hand, there is God's generosity, overwhelming generosity to us as our Savior, if we're trusting in Him, giving us eternal life, giving us fellowship with other believers, giving us His word and His promises and all these wonderful things.

He sustains us and sustains the world. He helps us every day through His Spirit. But then there is, on the other hand, there is the requirement of grace.

For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we're all familiar with, Jesus taught us how to be a neighbor. That's how to show grace in practice, and it requires a sacrificial and a practical response.

We receive grace from God. We are to act graciously. It is both generous and demanding at the same time. And this comes across once again in this passage that we've been reading.

The situation is a meal, which Jesus has been invited. The bit that we didn't read, Jesus healed a man who had come to Him. And as it was on the Sabbath day, some people there were rather cross about it.

[1 : 14] And He had taught the guests to be humble. He encouraged them to find the least important place at the table and be encouraged to be nearer the host, if that's where the host wanted them, rather than making a beeline for the most important places.

So that's what's happened so far. But then Jesus challenges His host even further and says that grace requires generosity.

And He says to this man that you must invite people who can't invite you back. Did you notice that? He said invite all these people who are poor, who are crippled and lame, the blind, those who can't invite you back to a nice meal.

So don't do things for what you can get back. Don't invite around your friends, your relatives, the rich people, in expectation that you're going to get a lovely meal or something else out of it.

And that command speaks to our hospitality, doesn't it? I don't think Jesus meant only invite these other people, but it's a challenge.

[2 : 25] To think about who can I invite? Who can I benefit with what I have? Not just to share it with the people who can give me something special in return, but for people who can't give anything back, who have nothing to give or nothing to give at the moment.

But there's a wider principle there, isn't there? Generosity, grace gives. It doesn't calculate God's returns. It doesn't calculate returns, but it waits for God's reward.

Jesus said if you do this, you will be blessed. You'll be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

One of the things that I've done some training on at work, which is considered important, I think, in civil service and elsewhere, is influencing.

Influencing skills. And the gist of influencing skills is that it's about persuading people to do what you want them to do or what you need them to do. And there's some value in it, and some of it is just sort of knowing how to get what you want out of people.

And that's a different kind of attitude, isn't it? It's completely the opposite. That's the world's way.

Get what you want out of people. But Jesus says, give what you can to people and be sacrificial.

[3 : 43] And it's a challenge to us. Do we befriend people who are needy, who are lonely, who are difficult to talk to in different ways? We naturally, as people, focus on our friends, the people we like, people we naturally gravitate to, because they give us something back.

There's fun, there's enjoyment, there's something shared. But we also need to reach out to those who need to receive from us and think about who we talk to at work or at the school gate or wherever we meet.

Now, when we've been speaking about this kind of thing before in our community group that I co-lead, somebody raised the question, a couple of people raised the question, does that mean we should then only seek out the most needy people and focus on them at the expense of people we already know?

And it's a good question, isn't it? Because it does sort of raise the opposite border. And I don't think Jesus is teaching us to do that and sort of give up the contacts we have. But it's just to recognize that we automatically, with our behavior, exclude certain people and move towards others.

That's just human behavior, isn't it? You see your friend, you see someone you don't know, you talk to your friend. And Jesus wants us to realize that there are lots of people, everyone needs him, and there are lots of needy people who no one wants to speak to and no one wants to deal with.

[5 : 06] And he's saying to us, you do it. You reach them with the gospel. You show friendship. You be something special for them. Give something to them, regardless of whether they can give something much back to you.

Well, it's a challenging teaching, and it was clearly too much for one of the men at the banquet. Because at the mention of the resurrection of the righteous, he says, blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.

Sounds like a good thing to say, doesn't it? But apparently this is the sort of thing that would be said, which is really presuming that everybody there will be all right in the end.

We'll all be together in the kingdom of the righteous, or the feast of the kingdom of God. That's what he's saying. He's saying, blessed is that man. But he's saying, well, I'm going to be there, and you'll be there. We'll all be there in the end. It'll all be marvelous.

And it provokes Jesus into teaching further that grace is by invitation only.

[6 : 15] Grace is by invitation only. And there is this banquet. They are sitting at a banquet, and so Jesus tells them a story about another banquet. And the people are being invited to this banquet, and he's telling it in a way to make us think about the gospel call that God calls people to respond and to trust in Jesus.

And it's a parable that teaches us about how people respond and to make us think about where we fit in these responses. The invitations go out from this great man to the people who he presumably normally invites to his banquets.

But there is a succession of feeble excuses. The first one says, well, I've bought a field, and I've got to go and see it. Name me one person who buys a field or a house or anything without seeing it first.

It just sounds ridiculous. Assuming the man isn't an idiot, it's just a feeble excuse. The next one says, well, I've bought your oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out.

Well, why did he buy them without trying them out? Well, of course he didn't. Of course he knew what he was buying when he bought them. It's a feeble excuse. It's like saying, well, I'm washing, me saying I'm washing my hair that day, which I do occasionally say as a joke to somebody.

[7 : 33] You know, if there's something there, trying to get me to do something I don't want to do, I say, well, I'm going to be washing my hair that day. As a joke, not a feeble excuse. And another one said, well, I've just got married, so I can't come.

Well, this isn't a culture where families are invited. He would have been expected to come and bring his wife with him and say, well, this is my new wife, and why don't you meet my friend and enjoy the banquet together?

These excuses are feeble, and it shows that their attachment to the host is not heartfelt. They don't really love this man. They're friends when it suits them, but deep down, they don't care.

And this is a challenge to those of us who are religious and want God on our own terms. We have our religion, we go to church, we do good things.

We have our nationality, perhaps, British or from Singapore, and say, well, that's my religion that I was born into. Or perhaps a social position that makes me think that I'm entitled to things, to everything, and so God must think I'm good.

[8 : 40] Perhaps I work with a charity. That must be good. God must love me. Or I do good things. My ethics are wonderful. I've got good reasons for doing everything. And in that way, we want to qualify to be in God's kingdom and qualify for his blessing.

But no one qualifies. No one is entitled. People must respond to an invitation. And our hearts are found out when that invitation comes, aren't they?

People's hearts are found out. They don't want to respond to the gospel. They find it offensive that somebody died for them. They're upset at Jesus' death.

Or they'll say, well, not now. When I'm older. Some other kind of excuse. But there is no time, is there, for this master in this parable.

He isn't prepared to wait for later. The invitation has gone out. It's been refused. And he is angry. And so he invites others. And the servant is to go out and invite those that Jesus had listed before when teaching at the table.

[9 : 53] The poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame. Those at the bottom of society. Those who can give nothing back. Those who deserve, well, in the thoughts of the society, deserve nothing.

Who are absolutely reliant on generosity, on charity, on giving. The beggars. Reliant on their families or anybody who would care for them.

And the master says, bring them. Invite them. And they came. They knew their need. And so they came. And in turn, emphasizes how we just simply need to accept God's invitation.

His salvation comes in Christ. We need to bow before Christ as Lord. And there is no other God available. There is no other way to be saved.

There is no other way to avoid the judgment that is to come of the anger of the heavenly master.

And no second chance in the parable. And we need to respond to that challenge.

[11 : 03] And if we're Christians, we need to remind ourselves and our hearts why we responded when we first did. And why we are Christians. Because it is this black and white. It's come now.

And don't reject God. You won't earn your way in later. It's not that you become a Christian on one day and then you, by being a good person, keep yourself in with God. And every day, we are there by invitation and by God's grace.

And while some reject God, God invites all kinds of people from all nations, men and women, those who are rich, those who are poor, the clever, the stupid, those who are despised by the world.

Everyone is invited. And those who see their need respond. The invitation goes out in Isaiah.

Through Isaiah, God says this. Come all who are thirsty. Come to the waters. And you who have no money, come buy and eat. Come buy milk and wine, without money and without cost.

[12 : 11] Why spend money on what is not bread and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me and eat what is good. And your soul will delight in the richest of fair.

Give ear and come to me. Hear me that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. Seek the Lord while he may be found.

Call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on him and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

And so God's banquet is open to those multitudes of people who will believe. And so the servant was sent out again.

And I think there's a couple of things to learn from the servant and what he does. Firstly, as Christians, we have this kind of mission of inviting people and bringing, bringing all comers, bringing the needy, bringing those who recognize the need of Jesus, bringing those, if we can, who don't, who will perhaps argue and debate and don't want to accept, at least to start with, that Christ is Lord.

[13 : 36] We have a mission to invite people to events. We may not be able to be the person who speaks up the front and we might worry about that and some people worry about that in their ordinary life or because I can't speak like Phil or Chris or somebody else, well, I won't speak to anybody.

Well, you can invite people. You can say what you know. You can say what you believe. You can say what God means to you and bring them to hear somebody else and something else who can explain things and answer their questions.

We have this message of bringing people to Jesus. We don't have to be the best speaker, the one who knows all the answers. We simply need to want in our hearts to share the gospel and if people will come, to bring them.

So there's a mission of inviting but also there's this, I think the servant sort of teaches us about what the Holy Spirit does because it's the Holy Spirit's ministry to persuade people's hearts.

And I think that's what's behind the word in verse 23 when the master says, go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in. It's a strong word, isn't it? Make them. It's not just say, would you mind coming if you don't mind?

[14:51] It's, you know, bring them. And that's, it's a hinting at us of what the Holy Spirit does when the gospel message is proclaimed. When God wants to work in someone's life, the Holy Spirit persuades our hearts and works in our hearts.

And while we think we're acting on our own volition, it's because we've been persuaded and drawn. You remember Paul when he talks about his conversion.

You remember he was converted on the road to Damascus. But when he talks about it afterwards, he talks about being pricked in his heart by goads as if there was something stabbing at him.

And that was the way he, I think, was explaining why he was so angry with Christ and so angry at the church to start with. It wasn't just his own anger and his own beliefs. It was actually God pricking his heart because deep down he thought, is there really something in it?

And that was the Holy Spirit working. And then in time, God spoke to him on the road to Damascus. And the Holy Spirit does that and troubles us and makes us want to find out and ask questions and persuades us of the truth.

[15:57] And like this servant, it makes us come in to the banquet. So grace is by invitation. Invitation only.

And so we need to answer God's invitation with a yes. To come when he asks and to come on his terms. And by refusing, it shows us up to be like those people who have those feeble excuses, not just the excuses, not just the reasons, but just it shows our hearts that we don't love God, that we don't want anything to do with him because of our sin, and we are rejecting him.

And although we might, in our minds, think of them as logical reasons for refusing to come, they are really a lack of love, really a hatred towards God, and that shows up.

And yet God calls those who the world despises and calls us, each of us, to come. And we need to come and respond.

And as we respond before that great day and that great banquet, that picture of heaven, we live our lives as Christians and respond to God's grace by showing grace to others, inviting them to come to God's banquet, showing love and friendship, and showing in our lives what God is like, his love, his kindness, shown in practice, in the most mundane of ways, bringing that grace into action.

[17:36] So that's God's word to us this morning. Will we respond to his invitation to salvation? Will we, with a yes, and we need to. And as Christians, do we respond by showing grace to others?

We need to challenge our hearts. Do we really love people? Do we really take the opportunity to call the people that God wants to call? Well, let's just pause for a moment and reflect on that.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your grace to us.

Thank you for this wonderful gospel. You've given this wonderful salvation in our Lord Jesus. Thank you that you invite all kinds of people to come to you and know life for eternity with you.

And we pray that you would speak to our hearts this morning and make us want to say yes, perhaps for the first time, perhaps for the umpteenth time, the thousandth time, over so many years, once again in our hearts saying that you are the King and we want to worship you and know Christ as our Savior.

[18:52] And Father, as we do that, we pray that you would make our hearts like your heart and hearts that want to show grace as well as receive it. Help us to invite, help us to befriend, help us to show love in every aspect of our lives as people look at us as your people.

And we pray that they might see your heart and your love for them through us. So we pray that you'd bless us and help us. Amen.

Amen.