

Grateful for God's Grace

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. I've had a bit of a revelation, to be honest. This week I had fresh insight that a certain brand of toilet paper is a fraction of the price of the other brand that I normally throw in the trolley each week. Shop well for less. You know, I've been a loyal customer of this particular brand. It's not only been close to my heart, it's been close to other parts of my body as well, but branding can make a huge impact, as these bears will tell you.

I mean, why would you choose a bear? You know, a bear, and also, again, we get dogs, don't we? Cuddly little puppies that are selling us this product, this brand, and they don't even use it. You know, the thing is that a leading advertising agency said, your brand is your chance to tell your customers a story. Branding is not just a logo or a design, the font you use or the products you sell. It's all these things and much, much more. It's the customer experience that you provide. It's the philosophy that you embrace and the culture you adhere to. A brand is a feeling that a business invokes in customers. It's what makes your business unique. But a brand isn't built overnight. It takes time. And the more often that we may think it needs a little push in the right direction from our side, give your brand the push in the right direction that it needs. I'm going to ask us this morning is, as we think about our theme of gratitude, we often forget the essential element of our brand within that is grace. What about grace? Grace makes in our Christian discipleship and apprenticeship to Jesus that mark of our Christian branding. People spot grace within us. That mark that was given to us by Jesus that we spoke about in our reading this morning. So essential for those that we're seeking to reach if we display grace. Paul spells it out. How blessed is God and what a blessing he is. He's the father of our master Jesus. Our gratitude to God isn't something that we should take for granted.

But here's another but, and it's an important but in here. Where does that gratitude, our immense gratitude and grace flow out and exhibit itself through our lives? How does that display itself in our everyday?

How do we display grace? You know, I didn't really grasp the enormity of grace until I read a book by Philip Yancey. You can see it's well read. It's what's so amazing about grace. And his strapline is the book, there is nothing you can do to make God love us more. There is nothing you can do to make God love us less.

[3 : 1 9] Unless we understand that element of grace that we have received from God, how are we able to share that grace with other people and that love that he has shown to us? We speak of grace often, but do we truly understand that enormity of grace that's been given to us? Do our lives proclaim grace in our actions? You see, grace is lived out. It's not something that we can manufacture.

It actually comes in us and through us into people's lives. People try to fake it, but like most fakes, we know that we can't keep it up for long. People spot it a mile off. Grace has to be lived, and that's through the generosity of God. Paul in Ephesus was in two years preaching in the synagogue, and people got this idea of grace. People came to faith. People came to understanding.

But again, there was a whole load of people who just wanted to drive Paul out of that place because actually all the icons that they were making to other faiths and other gods, they were losing trade. So they just drove him out. And as we negotiate our way through our teaching series on gratitude, where does grace sit within our lives, where does it get polluted by the outside world? Where does it get diminished, that grace in our lives? C.S. Lewis entered a conversation on comparative religions and defined grace, which is almost never used as a word. Instead, he communicated grace through parables in the Bible. So people asked him the question, what is Christianity's uniqueness amongst all these other world religions? And C.S. Lewis replied, that's easy. He said, it's grace.

It's grace that marks us out. The Gospels and parables often display grace, and we can see it in many that we remember the lost sheep, the lost coin. We can remember them all, the grace of God that goes out and saves. And Henry Neuwin points out, God rejoices not because the problems of the world have been solved, not because all human pain and suffering have come to an end, not because thousands of people have been converted and are praising him for his goodness. No, God rejoices because one of his children who was lost has been found, and that is grace. Maybe you're here this morning, or maybe listening to this for the first time, to say, actually, I acknowledge everything that's been said today, because it's the grace of God that found me and saved me. And it wasn't by works.

It was for God. And I acknowledge that relationship afresh today. It's always been for the one. It always has been. The graciousness that Jesus died on the cross, it will always be for the one. It will be for you and for me. He would have done it if there was nobody else at all. It would have always been for us. And until we actually grasp that idea of the grace of God, I'm not really sure we move very far in that discipleship that we call discipleship and apprenticeship. You know, it's in Christ that we find out who we are and where we are and who we're living for. And long before we heard of Christ, we got our hopes up. He had his eye on us. I often use that translation and said he often had his eye on me, because I think that makes it a little bit more personal. For this glorious living and part of the overall purpose, he is working out. But sadly, we all know that there's a rival brand, isn't there?

[7 : 22] There's a rival brand that culture says to us, even from nursery school onwards, teaches us how to succeed in the world of ungrace. You know, the early bird gets the worm. There is no such thing as a free lunge. Demand your rights. Get what you pay for. Work for what you earn. You know, we've often been absorbed by this ungrateful and ungraced habits into our lives. They can become like a brand upon us.

A brand that is very unhelpful and doesn't represent the true brand that Jesus has marked on our lives. Jesus spoke about a new life, about new beginnings. Repent, to turn around, to accept this grace which is freely given. And maybe there are those here this morning, maybe listening on the podcast as you're driving along, to say, I haven't really fully embraced that. There's still stuff I'm holding on to.

I haven't really bought into this grace of God's love and God's purpose for me that is for me no matter what I have done. You see, we didn't get what we deserved. That's the beauty of grace. I deserve punishment, yet I received forgiveness. I deserved God's wrath, yet I received love. I deserved the debtor's prison, yet received a clean credit history. I deserve stern lectures. I deserved a crawl on your knees, subservient grovelling to God's gratitude, yet I received a royal banquet, a robe around my shoulders and a ring that was placed on my finger to say that you are my son and you are my daughter. And that is grace. As C.S. Lewis puts it, to be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you. That's grace.

[9 : 33] Written almost 250 years ago, John Newton wrote the song Amazing Grace. He knew what that meant. He had been a slave ship owner. He had done the inexcusable in his life. And if you read about it, you know that that was inexcusable. Yet he came to a point where he suddenly realized that God's grace was in his life and repented and turned around and wrote this amazing song. He came alongside William Wilberforce, leader of the parliamentary campaign to abolish the African slave trade. No wonder he wrote, the chains are gone and I am free, but the chains are gone and I am free in order to experience God's grace.

And the world changed. The world changed through grace. The thing is, what brand do we carry? Do we carry the brand that the world has placed upon us?

Or do we carry the brand of grace that Jesus has freely given us? As we've talked about our series today, I just want to ask you, what brand do we carry when we leave here today?

Because people will spot it a mile off, but we will spot it in ourselves. I don't need to show grace. I need to live it.

What brand does our church in everyday living display? What is God's brand upon us? And maybe you'd like to recognize this morning afresh that amazing brand that God places with us that we can give, that we share, that was given to us.

[11 : 26] God's brand that's not branded into our chest in hot irons, but a brand that's placed into our life in love, forgiveness, renewal, and a recognition that God's love is for us and in us and through us to carry out all those covenant promises that we've promised this morning.

I'm just going to ask you to stand if you're able to this morning. As we reaffirm and ask for that recognition of God's grace in our life.

That whatever chains you have carried in your life, that as we accept Jesus, we are free. Free to go and share that grace and that love with every other, as unencumbered by the world and the culture, but to show grace.

Would you like to stand with me? Holy Spirit, would you come? You may feel that you wish to go and just maybe kneel somewhere because of that recognition of God's grace in our life for what we have done, that we are forgiven, that we are renewed, and God's grace on us.

You may wish to come and pray with somebody. There'll be people to pray with you just down here at the front. You may wish to come forward. You may wish to kneel. I'd be loved to kneel with you and pray with you. Holy Spirit, would you come?

[13 : 03] And would you recognize in us and through us your amazing grace? And as we sing these words together, Lord, would you fill us afresh with a sense of your Holy Spirit to go and make disciples and to show that love to a world that so desperately needs it at the moment.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.