

Sunday 7th July 2024 - That's The Spirit! : Grace

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[0 : 0 0] We're continuing this series that we've been doing for the last few weeks called That's the Spirit, looking at the presence of God in our lives through the Holy Spirit and the way in which God can shape our character and our conduct through that presence with us. So last week if you were here or you've caught up online we looked at a topic of wisdom and this week I'd like us to explore a word of equal if not more importance than wisdom which is the whole idea of grace. Now this word grace, although it's probably one which comes up a lot in connection with sort of church life, we've just been singing about it, comes up a lot in connection with our faith. It's not perhaps quite as common a term in the wider world perhaps than it is in church circles, this word grace. I mean I guess if you're a dancer or you watch Strictly or something, the word grace crops up there. Having grace or at least being graceful, that's the word often used to describe people who are dancing in a positive way of describing their flow and their rhythm and their elegance or their beauty in the movement. That's one way that grace is used. Another way which the word grace crops up though is perhaps we might call it grace under pressure, this way of handling a difficult situation with calm and dignity. And I think we've seen some of that on display this week. So even after such a stonking defeat, shall we say, I did think Rishi Sunak when he did his resignation speech outside number 10 on Friday. I think he spoke in a way which was both gracious and dignified, you know, especially in his recognition of Keir Starmer as, in his words, a decent public spirited man. There was grace there in that departing speech. Something which you might think might have been nice to have seen a bit more of during the campaign, but I'll let you decide on that for yourself. Although having said that, on Friday, I too had to display grace under pressure because we took the kids to Alton Towers for the day. And a rollercoaster, why? Indeed, roller coasters are not my thing. But I think, as you'll agree, from this picture, I was handling gracefully the pressure that I was under there on Smiler, ironically named the rollercoaster there indeed. Being graceful, being gracious. I guess we could say, you know,

Alton Towers aside, they're tied up with ideas of beauty and dignity, you know, a description, perhaps, of times when both, as we said at the top, both character and conduct, both our inner life and the outward expression of it seem to be consistent and in harmony with one another.

Now, interestingly, though, the consistency of character and conduct that this word grace suggests, it's very much in keeping, I think, with the way in which the grace of God, in particular, is spoken about in the Bible. So, for example, we read this of God in another psalm, Psalm 145.

Famous words, perhaps. It says, the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is gracious, we're told. So, we might say, thinking about dancing and dignity and all that. There's a beauty there in God's graciousness. There's a dignity there and in a character which is consistent with the way God acts, with God's outward conduct. Character and conduct, which is displayed through what? Well, by the fact that not only is the Lord gracious, the Lord is compassionate. And in the language which was originally written in Hebrew, the word we translate into English as compassion. It's the Hebrew word *rechem*, which actually means, originally, womb.

So, there's this sense with compassion of God carrying, you know, someone else, if you like, caring for someone else. There's that womb-like desire of God to see them flourish and so on in life.

[4 : 30] What else? Well, God is also described as being slow to anger. And again, interesting, the Hebrew word which we translate as anger here, it can also mean nostrils. Okay? You could also mean nostrils, which seems a bit random until I think we picture that kind of, that sharp, stern sort of intake of breath when someone's about to let rip on someone else, you know. But here, God is slow to anger. If you like, God's nostrils aren't flared, you know, he's very calm with this. God's breath is slow because the gentle breath of God's spirit is reassuringly calm. And then finally, in this verse, God is rich in love. And again, just to complete the Hebrew stuff, the Hebrew word we translate here as rich or in other translations in English, it's described as abounding in love or great in love, can also be translated as loud. So, we could say the Lord is slow to anger and loud in love.

Not embarrassed, if you like, to shout his love for us, to declare that all may hear how much he loves us indeed. I like that. God is loud in love. And so, in the Old Testament, at least, God's grace is intrinsically tied up with love and compassion, with patience and kindness, all of which I think is worth holding in mind when we come to the New Testament, because in the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, this same grace, it's central to both the character and the conduct of Jesus. And so, you get descriptions of Jesus from a very early age with these words, like this, for example, where in Luke's gospel we read, the child, Jesus, grew and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, as we looked at last week, and the grace of God was on him. The grace. Again, we could say the beauty, the dignity, the love, the compassion of God was on him. Or as John's gospel puts it, he says that Jesus came full of grace and truth. Full, we might say, again, rich in grace, even loud in grace. Loud because it's the word of God. Jesus is speaking and declaring grace over everyone. And yet, this New Testament description of grace, I think it also gives us another angle of understanding, because in the Greek word in which the New Testament was written, this word that we translate as grace, it's this word in Greek, *charis*, *charis*, and *charis* can be translated as grace, yeah, could also be translated as favour. We might say gift, gift. So, grace, this beautiful, compassionate love, it's gifted, you know, it's freely given to us by God. And I think this is key, because it means that God's love can't be earned. It's not something we're rewarded with for good behaviour, but neither is it something that is taken away if we mess up. No, God's love towards us is freely given. It's grace. It's a gift.

Now, sometimes in church circles, thinking about grace, grace is sometimes defined as this, as undeserved favour. An attempt, maybe, to emphasise the fact that we can't earn God's grace towards us.

It's a gift. And that's true. That's true. But I'm not sure this word undeserved is all that helpful, actually, when talking about grace, because for me, it can diminish the beauty of the gift that God gives to us.

Now, for example, our son, Bobby, he's got his birthday on Tuesday this week, and it's going to be a big 11 years of age. And we've got some presents, which, as his parents will give to him. And yet, can you imagine if, on his birthday, if we as parents said to him, you know, happy birthday, Bob, here's your gift.

[8 : 57] You don't deserve it, but we're going to give it to you anyway. He'd be pretty distraught, wouldn't he, if that was the tone of our giving to him. And rightly so, I think, since a gift is given because you love someone, not to do with whether they deserve it or not. Again, to go back to that verse about Jesus, when we're told that the grace of God was on him, hardly seems appropriate to me to say, the undeserved favor of God was on him.

Because again, any talk of what Jesus does or doesn't deserve from his heavenly father, kind of diminishes the beauty of the freely given and freely received love that exists at the heart of God. And so any talk of whether we're deserving or not of God's love, I think that misses the point of grace. Yes, there's a place for confession and contrition before God when we mess up. But that's never to bring into question whether or not we're still loved by God.

Now, we're not worms or miserable offenders in God's eyes. And actually, I think it probably breaks God's heart when we see ourselves primarily in that way, just as it would break my heart if Bobby or Heidi, our daughter, were to say to me as their dad, you know, oh, dad, I'm such a horrible person.

And actually, I've done so much wrong, I deserve to die. You know, I think, no, no, no, no, no, no, that's not how to speak of yourself. You know, they and we, you and I are children of God, you know, always have been, always will be loved because we're loved, recipients of grace, because grace is the gift of God's love freely given to us. And so I think for me that the definition perhaps of grace that I therefore find most helpful is one which I think was popularized by the writer Philip Yancey a good few years ago now in a book he wrote. He describes grace as the fact that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more, but equally there's nothing we can do to make God love us less. And why is that true? Because it's a gift, freely given, richly, loudly given, not earned, not traded, not deserved, not undeserved, not saved up for, not conditional, not limited, not lost. No, it's a gift. It's a gift. Full stop.

But then I'd say here's where things get even better, because as with any gift, it's given in order to be enjoyed and to be used and to be shared. You know, God's grace is a gift which is designed to keep on being given. Indeed, the more it seems we give out of God's gracious love, the more we're given to give away. We're replenished with that grace to share. So what does it mean to love others in the freely given, gracious way in which God has first loved us? Well, Jesus spoke a lot about the importance of this understanding of grace, but mainly through the telling of stories.

[12 : 20] And one of his best, certainly most famous stories about grace is a parable that he told concerning two sons. You might recognize it. It's often called the parable of the prodigal son or the lost son.

Now, if you're new to faith and new to church life, this story may be new to you, or it may be one that you've heard a hundred times if you've been coming to church over the years. But I want to look at it again briefly today and show it to us in a moment, because as I hope we'll see, I think it can speak afresh into just how radical and how challenging and ultimately how beautiful God's grace is meant to be. So we're going to look at the story. This is from Luke chapter 15.

Jesus continued. There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his field to feed pigs.

He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare?

[14 : 11] And here I am, starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him.

What a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again.

[15 : 23] He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field.

When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

Your brother has come, he replied. And your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, Look, all these years I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.

Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.

[16 : 31] My son, the father said, you are always with me and everything I have is yours.

But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. It's a cracking, timeless, multi-layered story.

And overall, it paints a picture of God as a father who will always love his children. You know, love, which has nothing to do, actually, with how they behave or whether they deserve it or not.

But love, which is a gift of grace, freely given in order to be freely received. But if we unpack it a little bit today, I think there are a couple of things which might help us get more of a handle, perhaps, on just how transformative the grace of God through the work of the Holy Spirit is and can be in our lives.

You see, it's a story, it's a parable, which, as I said, is traditionally known as the prodigal son. Prodigal in terms of being prodigious, you know, a reckless son who takes his father's inheritance and blows it.

[17 : 52] Eventually, with his tail between his legs, he comes home, expecting, even asking, to be treated as he thinks he deserves, only to find a dad who offers him nothing but love, you know, a gift of grace.

And the more we might hear this story, I guess we're often asked to marvel and be inspired by the gracious love of this father towards his prodigal son.

You know, this wayward son has brought shame on his dad, first by asking for his inheritance early, then by squandering it on immoral living, then by tending pigs of all animals, then by coming home destitute, and then by assuming that his dad would need to be convinced to take him back.

And so we're called, it seems, to know that no matter how prodigal we or others we know might be, God's arms, like the dad's, are always open. The gift of grace is always on offer.

And so we're to ask for God's help in treating others, as difficult as that might be, in the same way that the father treats his wayward son. And that's a fine lesson, that's a fine, classic lesson to take from this parable.

[19 : 11] And yet, if I'm honest, I quite like this prodigal son. I do. I think he'd have been good company.

You know, he'd have been a laugh to hang around with. He'd be happy to get the drinks in. He was someone who wanted to see the world. He's got a spark. He's got charisma. He's the kind of guy who you'd sort of say, God, what's he like?

And sort of roll your eyes a bit, but secretly quite enjoy being part of his world. You know, in short, I don't actually think he's all that difficult to love.

He's a cheeky chappy, shall we say, in that sense. He's not perhaps that hard to show grace to because you're warm to him, or at least I do, in this story.

And so I think for me with this story over the years, yes, the dad, this father figure who represents God, yes, he's brilliant and he's generous and he's kind and forgiving. But I kind of get it.

[20 : 14] I kind of understand how that dad could love this wayward son quite as much as he does. However, the other son in the story, the prodigal son's brother seen here on the right, I think he's altogether a different kettle of fish because in stark contrast to his charismatic brother, my word, he's miserable.

He's a miserable so-and-so. You know, when his wayward brother returns from wherever he's been and he can hear a party going on, we're told he stays out working in the field.

When he's told his brother has come back safe and sound, we're told he gets angry of all things. You know, again, talk about being self-absorbed.

When his dad comes and finds him and says, come on, join the party, he basically gives a kind of woe is me pitch. You know, all these years I've been slaving for you and what have you done for me?

Nothing, not even a goat and now you cook the fatted calf for my brother. Now for me, the way the father is with his older son, the fact that he says to him, my son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours.

[21 : 34] Now that is the kind of grace I find much harder to accept or to emulate. You know, if I was this guy's dad, I think I'd be far angrier with this boring, smug, self-absorbed, entitled, selfish man here.

I'd want to sit him down and say, look, what is wrong with you? Your brother's come back. What is your problem here? In other words, I'd struggle, humanly speaking, to show him the unconditional love, the grace that the father in the story manages to show him.

And yet that kind of grace, that's the kind of grace that the kingdom of God is all about, says Jesus. Learning to show love to those who we find most difficult, not just to those who we might have a soft spot for, you know, I don't know about you, but I find that showing love to people who I really don't like.

I find that really hard, really hard. You know, for example, this week, I was chatting, or I got chatting with a guy on our street who I didn't know, never spoken to before, he's a few doors down from us, but he knew within two seconds of us chatting that I was the local vicar.

and within seconds, and this is completely true, he said to me, I'm not religious myself, live and let live, I say, except those Muslims, those Muslims coming over here, bringing their Sharia law, do you know what, we're soon going to be imprisoned for dropping litter, he said to me.

[23 : 16] And I'm just, really, really, how do I show grace to him within ten seconds of meeting me, he's saying that kind of stuff. Well then, on Thursday this week, I had to attend a meeting at the job centre in Litchfield to discuss our transition as a family from tax credits to universal credit, you know, taking months of bank statements and proof of earnings and so on.

And even though I was completely transparent, I got nothing to hide on all this, the person dealing with me made me feel this small, made me feel this small, you know. She kept calling me Matthew as well, which was on my form, which kind of wound me up a little bit because it sounded like I was a naughty child, you know, I'd call myself Matt.

But you know those people who just seem to enjoy making you squirm a bit in life. How do I show grace to her? How do I show grace to her?

Well then, on Thursday night, as I watched the election results come in, you know, seeing pundits repeatedly avoid calling out Nigel Farage's reform party for the far right movement that it is and instead getting sucked in by the fact that he is a great communicator who's captivating to watch.

How can I think gracious thoughts about Nigel Farage when for me personally, I detest what he stands for and his rhetoric is so opposite to the ways of Jesus?

[24 : 49] You know, three situations, none of which I think are acceptable, all of which need challenging, but all of which contain people whether I like it or like them or not.

They are loved by God just as much as I am. And I'm sure if you're brutally honest, there are probably people in your life who you struggle with to the extent that it's hard to imagine loving them in anything like the way that God does.

And so how might we grow in grace? How might the Spirit of God enable us to share the grace that we've already received with those around us, even those who might do our heads in?

Well, by way of drawing this together, really, I just want to share an illustration I saw this week which for me I think gives us an insight into how we might grow in the grace of God.

And we're going to shift this out the way in order to do this, but I want us to imagine for a moment that we are a chair and that God is a chair, okay?

[26 : 04] Now, when we talk about the way that we relate to God and the gospel understanding of that, a lot of the classic way of describing it is that we are created and made by God that we are sort of facing God.

We have this relationship from being born, really, with God. And a classic understanding goes that, yeah, as we go through life, as we get things right, that relationship is good, but as we get things wrong and we mess up, it's the equivalent of us turning away from God.

We're not facing God anymore because our sin takes us away from God. And the classic understanding is that because God is holy, God can no longer look on us because we're full of sin, so God turns away as well.

Now, again, the understanding is when we realize, when God convicts us, if you like, of our sin and we repent and we change our ways, when we turn back to God, God can then forgive us and turn back and all is well.

That's one way of understanding how we relate to God. Another different way, though, is to think of it like this. Yes, in the same way, we're made and created and loved by God from the word go.

[27 : 26] God faces us, if you like. Even so, even though we've got that relationship, yes, our behavior sometimes means that we're not looking at and focusing on God.

We turn away from God with the choices, the bad choices that we make. But instead of God turning away from us, grace says God pursues us, keeps looking at us, keeps searching for us, keeps wanting us to know him in our lives.

Sometimes we might find that difficult, we might reject that and we might choose to turn away from God again, but you know what? God does the same thing. He comes around here and he says I'm still here, I still love you, I still want to face you, I still want you to be part of things and we can do it time and time again.

But God is relentless in pursuing us with his love. It's that parable of the lost sheep, you know, the sheep might wander off but the shepherd pursues the lost one here, the coin might get lost but God, the woman pursues the coin, finds the coin.

The lost son, the prodigal son, he might walk away but God the father comes and looks for him and finds him on the horizon. The older brother, he might think, I'm in the field, I don't want to be anywhere near you but the father goes out looking for the son in the field and says come on, join the party.

[28 : 51] So we can do this all day if you want, time and time again but the good news is that God's pursuit of us will never end because God's grace is unending for us.

I would suggest the kind of grace that we're talking about when we talk about the way God loves us. Grace of God never gives up on us.

No matter how many times we might turn away or move away from God, God's grace will always seek us out. That's grace, the constant offering of the gift of love by God, given and given and given until we come to a place where we're happy to receive that grace and we choose to live in God's presence forever.

And that for me, that kind of little chair illustration, that for me is a helpful picture perhaps for how we're to deal with people who we find it hardest to love, hardest to be gracious towards.

So for my neighbour who I struggle with, I need to ask for God's help, not to turn away from him, but to face him in his opinions, not to avoid him or to write him off, but to be open to the way in which God's spirit of grace, maybe working through me, maybe working through us, might just give him a glimpse of a different way to live.

[30 : 23] The writer Richard Rohr, he says this, he says, the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better. Or for my universal credit advisor, I may never see her again, but I can learn from that experience by asking God to help me to show more grace, more empathy, more dignity, more love to those who find themselves in similar positions to me, within a benefit system that all too often can heap shame on people when they're already struggling.

Or for those in politics who I disagree with, I can join organisations, as I have done, to campaign not against them, personally, but against their policies.

But I can also do, as Jesus suggests, and pray for my enemies and those who seek to persecute the vulnerable, since it's hard to hate someone you're genuinely praying for.

And who knows what transformation the Spirit is able to bring about when we pray for those we struggle with. And in all of this, in all of this, I need, we need, the humility to recognise that God's grace is just as much a gift to us as it is to anyone else.

Grace is not about who does or doesn't deserve it. Grace is a gift to be given to all, so that all may come to know the loving kindness of God in their lives.

[32 : 03] And that's why, when we pray, we can pray these words, as we so often do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

Amen.