

Joy: The Joy of Grace - 12th February 2023

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 0 0] Hello everyone, morning, morning, morning. My name is Matt, if you don't know me, I'm Vicky here at St. John's. And as Ian has kindly said, we're in the middle of this Sunday series that we've been doing for recent weeks called Joy.

Essentially really what it means to have the gladness of God's presence with us through all of the ups and downs of life. And it was so inspiring last week and I'm very grateful indeed to Kathy and Vicky and Angel who shared about their experiences of moving here from Hong Kong.

And how despite the heartache and their very real concerns for their homeland, there was still joy for them in knowing God's generous, loving presence with them through it all.

And if you were here, you'll be aware it's a special service. But I'm afraid we decided to take down the YouTube video that was up briefly after Sunday. As Kathy was saying initially, yeah, it would be okay to share it and we went for it.

But then on reflection overnight, having put it online, it was felt between us really that what they shared could have put them at risk should they ever go back to Hong Kong and families out there as well.

[1 : 0 7] So it'll have to remain one of those services that was in the moment perhaps. But again, even that decision, I guess it underlines the precarious nature of freedom for so many people in the world.

And I know we'll continue to hold Hong Kong and all its people, whether here or over there in our prayers. But I guess this awareness perhaps of what others may be going through as we were hearing last week.

We're going to come back to that idea a bit this morning because it's part of a bigger topic that I'd like us to look at today, which is the way in which joy is very much connected to this word, grace, grace.

Now grace is one of those very Christian words. It crops up a lot in churchy circles, whether in our songs, our prayers, our readings, perhaps at our mealtimes as well. And a bit like joy, it's a little word with a big meaning.

Indeed, if we look at how it's used in the Bible, if we start with the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, the word we translate as grace is from the Hebrew word, chen.

[2 : 1 5] Chen, okay. Now, chuckle it here. I know you love a bit of language in the morning on a Sunday. So even if you don't, the good news is with Hebrew in these winter months, it clears the sinuses a little bit as well.

So if you're munching on some mucus this morning, this is your chance to get rid of it, okay. So you want to say chen with me after three? One, two, three. Chen. And then swallow probably as well.

Good stuff, good stuff. Now, chen is an interesting word, I think, because as well as being translated as grace in the Old Testament, chen is also used to describe something that is elegant or beautiful.

So it's the same word that we read about in Proverbs, for example, where a deer is described as chen. You know, this elegant sort of stag there. You've got a necklace as well, which in Proverbs is described as chen in terms of its beauty.

Where's chen over here? Chen, our English name, chen. It means handsome, I believe, which is obvious, obviously. Same root though, handsome, beautiful.

[3 : 24] Chen, chen and all that. So something elegant to behold in our midst as well. Now, how do we get though from chen, meaning beauty and elegance and so on, to chen also meaning grace?

Well, the idea, I think, is that beautiful objects, whether a deer or a necklace or a distinguished gentleman, you know, they generate, if you like, a favourable response in us.

We look upon them with delight, with favour. And so often in the Bible, this word chen, yes, it can mean beauty, but more often it's translated as this word, favour.

Favour. Now, when we tend to use the word favour these days, I guess it's often in the form of a request. You know, can you do me a favour, please? So you might sort of help someone across the road.

You might pick up the kids for them from school. You might hold my pint while I go to the loo. It could be any kind of favour, big or small, in this. You know, something we do for nothing simply because we're happy to, because we're looking with favour on someone else.

[4 : 34] And this idea of doing something for nothing, well, that's often how the Bible speaks about favour, as being unearned, undeserved even.

And that, it seems, is what grace is. That's what chen is. Yes, it's beautiful. But above all, we might say it's undeserved favour.

Grace is not something we can demand. It's not something we earn. It's not even something we can pay back. No, rather, grace is a gift. Grace is the undeserved favour that someone gives to us.

And when I say someone, what the Bible tells us, that the ultimate grace giver is God. So, for example, we read in the Psalms words like this.

It says, The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. Or again, similar in the book of Nehemiah, we read this. You are a forgiving God, gracious, that word again, and compassionate.

[5 : 38] And there are actually dozens and dozens of verses throughout the Bible, just like these two. We've just seen all about God being gracious and compassionate, all saying God is gracious.

Now, the writers of the Old Testament, I think they recognised God's grace, primarily through the way he didn't abandon them. He didn't abandon people like Abraham and Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and so on.

Even when they got things horribly wrong. And they did get things horribly wrong through the course of the history of murder, adultery, idolatry, and so on. And yet instead, God kept loving them and providing for them and their people through it all.

As we say, through all those ups and downs. Even though their behaviour, I'm sure, did God's head in. He never gave up on them. God's undeserved favour, God's grace remained.

Because, as it says, God is gracious. What's more, that's the Old Testament. When we get to the New Testament and we get to Jesus, we see in him someone who lived out and offered this same favour, this same undeserved grace of God.

[6 : 51] But we see it writ large in person with Jesus. Indeed, if we flick through the Gospels, we see Jesus' gracious approach on every page.

It really is on every page. So there's the kindness, perhaps, of his conversations with people like the woman at the well or Zacchaeus, with those caught in adultery. But there's also the way in which he healed people as well, who the rest of society, perhaps, would have deemed to be undeserving of such.

Favour, beggars, lepers, so-called unclean women. Even the dead, who had been seen as unclean and impure, he raised back to life. All sorts of, I guess we could say, outsiders and misfits are treated with grace, with favour by Jesus.

And perhaps most vividly, even on the cross, at the height of his own suffering, Jesus still demonstrates grace to those who many would think were completely undeserving of it.

So as you saw the other week, Jesus promised salvation there and then to the thief hanging on the cross next to him. But then just as remarkably, he then asked for forgiveness for the Roman soldiers who had crucified him, saying famously, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing.

[8 : 11] Again, that's grace. That's undeserved favour. It seems to me, I think, that Jesus' interaction with the outcasts of society, with the thief on the cross, with the Roman soldiers and so on.

I guess it kind of messes with any neat ideas we might have about how we might win God's favour. Because instead, God's grace doesn't depend on what we've done for God, but rather on what God has done for us.

That's key, I'll repeat it, I'll say it again. God's grace doesn't depend on what we've done for God, but rather on what God has done for us.

And this means, I think, that it's crucial for us and our understanding of God that we recognise that this grace, this favour, it's a gift.

It's a gift. Now, why is this understanding important? Well, think about it like this. If we said, for example, that we deserved God's favour, then receiving it, in a way, would be like a payment.

[9 : 25] We'd have earned it through our hard work or our good deeds. It meant we deserved to be rewarded. And to be fair, Jesus talks elsewhere about that kind of transaction as also being part of the way God works.

You know, a worker deserves their pay and all that. He's not against reward for work done well. And yet, in terms of grace, a gift, by definition, it can't be earned.

You can't earn a gift. That's why it's a gift. Gifts are freely given, not because anything is expected in return. No, they're given out of love. They're given out of delight to the one you want to receive it.

And yet, I wonder these days if perhaps we've lost a bit of understanding of the concept of gift today. I mean, take Christmas, a couple of months ago now.

It's often become a time, I think, when gift is one thing, but we tend to sort of swap presents. We certainly do in our family. You know, we'll spend a tenner on you. You spend a tenner on us.

[10 : 29] We'll call them gifts. And yet, there might be some sort of special thought that goes into it, but more often than not, you have to ask each other what they like, and then it can get pretty daft, really, because they're not really gifts in that sense.

It's like a swap shop. You know, Noel Leblins would have been proud. It's a transaction that happens. We get back what we think we deserve, even to the penny. Tenner, tenner. What is the point?

In many ways, just a faff to wrap, in my opinion, but there we go. And yet, a bit of Scrooge there, sorry. And yet, when God pours out his grace, on us, through all sorts of ways, through the gift of life, creation, the gift of Jesus, the gift of his spirit, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of community, the gift of eternity with him, and they are all gifts, because they're offered to us regardless of anything we've done, then God, I think, really doesn't want us to try and pay him back for these gifts.

In fact, if we try to, I think it simply reveals that we haven't accepted them as gifts, freely given by God, that they might be freely received by us.

Like you and I, we can't return the favour with God. We can't pay God back. And in many ways, to try and do so risks insulting the giver.

[11 : 53] Instead, I think what's so amazing about grace is that it's a gift of undeserved favour that we simply need to receive.

And that's not easy to accept, perhaps. But that, more than anything, I think can be a real source of joy for us. And yet it's also true that the point of a gift is that it's not meant to stay wrapped up.

We're meant to use it. So I guess the question for us might be, how does God want us to use, not just accept, but use his gift of grace to us?

I want to suggest that it's not about trying to pay God back for his grace. Now instead, God wants us to pay his gift of grace forward.

Not back to him, but forward to others. God wants us to treat others with the same grace, the same undeserving, freely given favour that we have received from him.

[12 : 56] That's, I think, what makes God happy. So what does it mean to treat other people with grace, you know, to look upon them favourably? Or perhaps most importantly, I think it's this, and I mentioned this at the top, I think grace always assumes that there's more going on for people than we might be aware of.

there is always a bigger story going on than perhaps we realise. For example, you'll be as aware of me that we live in a world where there is enormous pressure to be seen to be living your best life, you know, particularly for young people these days, I think, and particularly on social media.

So this kind of thing, you know, the filtered, photoshopped selfies, the posts about amazing holidays or days out, the perfectly lit meals or the smiles of happy family times.

We see them on our screens, but they can all contribute, I think, not only to us feeling inadequate or boring in comparison, but easily stoked if we're not careful, bit of resentment, bit of jealousy as well, that we think we're missing out because other people seem to be having a cracking time.

And we end up judging the way, perhaps, other people seem to be living and assuming, because of the smiles. They must have it all and we haven't. And yet, you'll also know as well as me that the most outwardly glamorous lifestyles are often simply a mask for the most miserable of realities.

[14 : 33] It's like tears of a clown from yesterday on social media, I think, today. And I think many of us, whether we're on social media or not, I genuinely think this, I think a lot of us live with constant feelings of inadequacy.

I don't know if that resonates with you, that feeling perhaps if you're a parent that you live with the constant guilt of not being enough for your children. Or if you're a carer, that guilt of craving time away from those you're committed to looking after.

maybe in so many work settings, we live with non-existent affirmation from our bosses. So many young people, I think, and I'm getting out of our oldest, is in high school.

Pick this up. They never experience or rarely experience their friends seemingly taking genuine delight in their achievements because instead they live in this constant state of competition and trying to find where they fit in the ladder of life.

And so I think it's no wonder that given the chance we love to talk about ourselves to anyone who will listen because it's rare for someone it seems to take a genuine interest in us.

[15 : 53] It's no wonder that after the only meal time of the week perhaps that the kids have actually enjoyed that we want to stick a photo of them on Instagram because we desperately want someone to tell us that actually we can do it and we are a good parent.

It's no wonder that we post a picture perhaps of the new haircut or the dress or the suit because we need to know that we look okay since hardly anyone seems to tell us that anymore. It's no wonder we share that we've been somewhere special because it reassures us that we don't always live the boring life that we sometimes fear we do or perhaps that day out gave us the distraction we needed from the constant physical pain we might be in and we just wanted to celebrate the fact that that was a good day today and we want to share that with others and so on and so on.

Now those kind of posts you know what they are and we can judge those I guess we can judge those kind of people as being self-absorbed or narcissists and yeah I guess a small proportion may well be but far more people I think are simply seeking love love and affirmation because their lives our lives are so much more complicated and difficult than people might think the grace filled response I'd say therefore to this is to assume the latter to ask for God's wisdom in seeing perhaps behind the filters behind the smile and to realise that because people seek online likes from people they don't really know or seem to love talking about themselves and we're together perhaps our job therefore is not to critique that but simply to be their encourager to be their affirmer their empathiser their biggest supporter yes online if we want to click a few likes but more importantly

I'd say in person to be the giver of undeserved unearned favour simply because that's what God does for us and calls us to therefore do for others that I would suggest in our culture is an easy way to put grace into action you know when Jesus is criticised as he often was for having so many meals in the homes of tax collectors and sinners seems to me he makes a point of sharing these meals yes to demonstrate the kind of inclusive nature of his good news but also on a very human level to give him an opportunity to affirm and encourage those who might otherwise never hear a positive word said about them imagine Zacchaeus we talked about him the other week I can't imagine he had anyone being nice to him for years at a time and yet it's Jesus who says

I want to come to your house you can feed me that was empowering to Zacchaeus in a way that I doubt anyone else had done for years and we talk about Jesus healing people physically I think that kind of gracious response to people that heals them internally in just as profound a way as perhaps a miracle or a life transforming work of wonder might do wonder how we might echo that way what else does it mean perhaps to treat people with grace with this undeserved favour well I'd say it means we treat them as best we can with as much patience and as much forgiveness as possible so again if Jesus is our model on this the centrality if we look through his life of patience and forgiveness to the grace that he offers I think it's underlined best of all with a little exchange that he has with Peter in Matthew's

[19 : 52] Gospel where we're told this Peter came to Jesus and asked Lord how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me up to seven times and Peter's thinking that's my limit that's my limit that's about as much grace as I've got and Jesus answered now I tell you not seven times but 70 times seven now not 490 if you're into your car of order and maths it's just basically saying you know don't even keep count don't keep count in fact lose count you keep on forgiving because grace doesn't keep a score now one level that kind of command from Jesus to keep on forgiving that can be difficult to stomach for us especially if people keep on doing things that require us to forgive them the writer Philip Yancey this guy here he writes this in one of his cracking books on grace he says grace is tough and difficult it means showing love and compassion to people who may take advantage of it it means forgiving those who have wounded us and sacrificing our own interests for the sake of others now a little caveat here of course in cases of abuse and neglect forgiveness doesn't mean that we continue to put ourselves or others at risk by staying put in a harmful situation or relationship but those kind of situations I think are the legitimate exceptions to the broader rule in which it's generally better to keep on being generous and treating people with favour even if that might mean we're occasionally taken for a ride better to do that than risk withholding grace from them indeed that's the way of

Jesus that we're called to follow it's a bit like when you walk down the shops or whatever and you see someone who's on the street and they appear to be hungry now do you walk on by because you know maybe one in ten are going to rip you off and they're doing fine thank you and it's just their way of getting money to supplement whatever else they're doing or do you say I'm going to give you food anyway and if you're not genuine I'd rather make sure I took the chance that you were than walk on by that's this kind of idea we keep on going even if it risks us occasionally getting ripped off for it they were told in Hebrews this one and this is challenging I think it says see to it that no one misses the grace of God it seems to me the only way to ensure that no one misses out on grace is to offer it as widely and as regularly as possible and let God sort out the rest with the recipients and then I got this little rule it's a bit of a saying I suppose that I try to live by I guess in recent years which I think has been a big help for me in trying to treat people with grace and not get hung up when

I feel someone hasn't paid their way or whatever when I was younger and you know 20s and stuff I was a tightwad I really was I penny pinching just tit for tat kind of thing if you went out with mates you sort of made sure that if they hadn't bought you a drink you wouldn't you know what I mean it's that kind of everyone gets around it and if someone doesn't quite get you even the same quality lager that you bought them kind of thing you're talking 20 30p difference you know it's like I'm going to ask you for an expensive one next time just to get back on a level with it and I used to sort of this mental kind of tick list and checklist of tit for tat you know what do I deserve because I've given this to you instead though what I've realized over the years is that whenever I feel a bit disgruntled or that begins to grow in me with someone I ask myself this question I say are you going to be worried about this Matt on your deathbed and because the answer is usually without hesitation no I'm not bothered if they've got me a

Stella or a Carling I'm not going to remember that on my deathbed I tell myself well let it go then let it go it doesn't matter and as simple as that sounds I found that quite transformational really quite freeing because it means I don't have to harbor resentment or keep a mental score or look to get my own back no no grace and peace I think I mentioned together in the Bible because grace brings peace it releases us from having to keep score so not only is grace a free gift to others grace when we practice it is a gift which frees us as well and I guess we've all of this I guess there's there's three thoughts really just to kind of summarize it all and bring it home perhaps firstly I think again in my experience grace is one of the most contagious things things around the more we're treated with grace we've undeserved favor by others but the more it seeps into our soul and slowly in time it inspires us to treat people with the same grace that we have received and if in our grace we encourage others not to try and pay us back but to pay it forward instead then each subsequent little act of grace will slowly but surely change the world so that's contagious but secondly I think grace is captivating you know of all the ways we might try and share something of God's love and God's ways with other people again in my experience it's grace which dumbfounds people it's grace which speaks to people most of all undeserved favor the offer of a free gift simply given in delight it's so unexpected it's so countercultural that it compels people to want to know more to want to know where that motivation where that grace comes from and so whether it's cans of pop little friends or the

Christmas day lunch or play equipment in the park whether it's the offer of a listening ear or a shoulder a cry on or a helping hand when we're down whether it's a promise to pray a commitment to care or forgiveness in the face of failure all points towards the grace giver himself Jesus the one who gave his life so that we might know the gift of new life through him and that truth however it's demonstrated whether in word or deed or thought that's ultimately what makes grace so captivating I think for those who experience it because it all points to Jesus the one who is gracious and then thirdly and finally today to go full circle grace I'd say is a key way for us to know joy joy you know we started with a bit of Hebrew from the Old Testament going to finish with a little bit of Greek from the New Testament this morning and the Greek word in the New

[27 : 06] Testament that we translate into English as grace is this one caris caris done some Hebrew we'll do some Greek this morning and one two three caris beautiful and yet what's fascinating is that one of the main Greek words for joy is this word kara a one two three let me say kara kara beautiful okay so caris and kara grace and joy if you put those two words together as you'll see they're intrinsically connected not just in their sound but more profoundly in terms of their spirit God's gift of grace his undeserved favor to us grace that we can experience in all sorts of ways but most of all through the love and the life of Jesus well it's intended to give us great joy this this gladness that God is with us through it all joy which comes from knowing that whatever we go through God's grace is sufficient for us and so may the grace of our Lord Jesus

Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore amen amen