

Questions of Faith: How Can I Accept Grace When I Feel So Unworthy?

Romans 3:9-26, Genesis 3:20-4:1

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We are wrapping up our summer sermon series “Questions of Faith.” For the past eleven weeks, we have considered some really big questions, and this one is no exception. “How can I accept grace when I feel so unworthy?” We received a couple of variations of the same question, and I want to acknowledge the power and validity of it. This question is a bold admission of some tough feelings, and it gets right at the heart of many people’s experience with faith and religion. It asks us to confront head on our feelings of inadequacy and our very human failings and questions how we can truly believe that a perfect God can love our imperfect selves.

The word “grace” is a familiar one to most Christians, and it should be. But, as with many theological concepts, it can easily be misunderstood, or misused. And so as we ponder our question this morning, I am going to invite you to look at a familiar story with new eyes. This is perhaps my favorite scriptural story about grace.

Throughout the years, the story of Adam and Eve has been studied and interpreted by all sorts of people, who find in it all sorts of things, using it to condemn human nature, femininity and the quest for knowledge, among other things. This story has not frequently been interpreted through the lens of grace, but I think that is a mistake. I’d like to read the end of their story- after Eve is formed from Adam’s rib, after they walked unashamedly naked through the garden. After the serpent spoke to Eve, Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, after Adam ate, and the Lord discovered their disobedience. After the punishment was handed down, this is what we read...

Genesis 3:20-4:1

Did you hear it? Did you catch the grace in this passage? Too often, Christians assume that grace burst upon the world scene on a chilly night in a manger stall, and it is true that in Jesus Christ we experienced grace in its truest form, but in this story of the beginning of humankind, we see that grace was in God and with God and of God from the very beginning.

Immediately upon the heels of their blatant disobedience, before the heat of the anger could even cool, in the next breath after the pronouncement of their punishment, God did something extraordinary and grace-filled for Adam and Eve. He made garments of skin for

them and clothed them. Knowing their shame and recognizing their deepest need, God acted out of love and gave them what they needed.

It wasn't because they deserved it; clearly they had been disobedient and done what God had explicitly told them not to do. The loving, parental, protective act of providing clothing was not a reflection on what they had done; it was a reflection on who God is. It didn't condone or excuse their act, and it didn't release them from its consequences, but it did show them that, in spite of their disobedience, still they were known, cared for and loved. It is a stunning act of grace, one that sadly gets overlooked in the rush to point fingers and place blame for humanity's shortcomings.

When I first began pondering today's question, "How can I accept grace when I feel so unworthy?" immediately I thought of another question: "How can I accept grace if I don't feel unworthy?" Grace is, by its very definition, an unmerited gift. It depends not upon the worthiness of the receiver, but upon the goodness of the giver. If I feel worthy of what I receive, then I am getting a prize or a reward, not grace.

It didn't take me long to recognize that it's all well and good to understand that up here, but it's another thing entirely to really grasp it here. We live in a culture that is flat-out obsessed with assessing merit. In relationships and in families, at school and at work, on teams and in communities, we are bombarded with messages of how we are to act, what we are to do, and what will happen if we fail to live up to those expectations.

None of us has to look very far to find examples of how we are wanting in some way- we are too loud or too quiet, too fat or too thin, too needy or too selfish, too sad or too opinionated. Just about everything we do is judged by someone, including ourselves, and so there will always be someone somewhere telling us that we are not worthy of this or of that.

For some of us, the message came from parents or other authority figures- live up to these expectations or you aren't worthy of love. For some, it comes from a romantic partner whose love is always dependent upon how we act- or how they perceive that we act. For others, it comes from within- a voice saying, no matter what you do, that it isn't enough, that it isn't acceptable.

So we begin to question - if we are not good enough to be on a team, or in a relationship, if we don't please our boss or our parent or our children, if our friends and coworkers are sick of our behavior- then how on earth could the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-seeing God could possibly love us?

Tragically, for far too many people, that is exactly the message they have heard from the church. Countless men, women and children have been told by religious leaders that if they

failed to live up to a certain standard, or if they did certain things or didn't do other things, then they would be cast out of God's love forever. In the name of God, people have drawn lines around God's love, safely tucking themselves and those with whom they agree inside, and casting out those whose actions, decisions, mistakes, and very existence they deem unacceptable.

If you have been put on the other side of that line, or if for any reason you have come to believe that you are outside the scope of God's love, I want you to hear this: that is wrong. There is much we cannot know about our God, but if there is anything that scripture tells us about God's character it is this: the God of Adam and Eve, of Abraham and Jonah, of David and Peter and Rahab and Paul is a God of love, forgiveness and grace.

There is not a single human being in all of scripture outside of Jesus Christ who *deserved* God's grace. Every one of them was weak, sinful, and unworthy in one way or another. And still God loved them, God called them, God used them. He didn't leave them in their weak state, but neither did he reject them for it. In every story from Genesis through Revelation, God's love is not something to be earned, it is something to be received.

If it was true for them, then it is true for us.

In his interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve, Rabbi Harold Kushner boldly takes on the concepts of human guilt and inadequacy. In his typically pastoral and powerful way, Kushner makes the point that the actions of Adam and Eve revealed the humanness of humankind, celebrating the fact that we are the only creatures able to be aware of the moral dimensions of the choices we make. This makes our lives complicated and at times difficult, but it also makes them richer and more meaningful. He argues that "we are more whole when we are incomplete," and that "to be whole before God means to stand before him with all of our faults as well as all of our virtues, and to hear the message of our acceptability."

This kind of thinking opens its arms to the human condition. It embraces the fact that, as Paul wrote, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," but it doesn't let us stay there. It acknowledges that our existence is not static- we are not simply good or bad, forgiven or forgotten. We are real, dynamic beings who will do great things and terrible things, who will soar and who will fall, who will honor God and who will fail to honor God.

And the good news- the great news- is that those things do not change God. In Jesus Christ, God took on our failings and our shortcomings, our weakness and our sin, died for them and rose in triumph over them. That, my friends, is grace.

A theology of grace, in which we firmly stand as Reformed Presbyterian Christians, is dramatically different from the works righteousness thinking that is the hallmark of many

Christian denominations and much secular thinking. Works righteousness says that you are worthy because of what you do, or what you avoid doing. It holds up the Ten Commandments, other scripture passages, rules, norms and standards of behavior and says, if you do what this says, then God will love you.

A theology of grace sees it differently. It says, do what this says, but not to make God love you. Do what this says *because* God loves you. It is not your worth that earns you God's love. It is God's love that gives you worth.

I recently read the memoir of an extraordinary man. The late Brennan Manning was an Irish Catholic New Yorker, a priest, speaker, and writer. He lived a very interesting life, serving as a Marine in Korea, then going to seminary and being ordained to the priesthood, taking orders as a Franciscan, working alongside field laborers in Spain and shrimpers in Louisiana, and later leaving the priesthood to get married. Throughout that time, he wrote and spoke a great deal about his experience of God. He is perhaps best known for his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, which focuses on the power of God's grace to change people's lives.

All is Grace is Manning's memoir, a courageous telling of his faithful, amazing, painful, beautiful life. In addition to all that he did throughout his life, Manning was an alcoholic, and he battled his addiction from age sixteen until his death last year. At times, he kept his addiction hidden, and it led him down some very dark roads. But later in his life he courageously wrote and spoke about the reality of living with alcoholism, and his own feelings of inadequacy and failure. He had stared darkness in the face, but so too had he experienced the power of God's love in the places of his deepest despair. In his writing, his speaking, and his life, Manning was an evangelist of grace.

Reflecting upon his almost eighty years- years of tragedy and joy, struggle and happiness, Manning wrote this:

My life is a witness to vulgar grace – a grace that amazes as it offends. A grace that pays the eager beaver who works all day long the same wages as the grinning drunk who shows up at ten till five. A grace that hikes up the robe and runs breakneck toward the prodigal reeking of sin and wraps him up and decides to throw a party no *ifs, ands* or *buts*. A grace that raises bloodshot eyes to a dying thief's request – “please, remember me” – and assures him, “You bet!” A grace that is the pleasure of the Father, fleshed out in the carpenter Messiah, Jesus the Christ, who left His Father's side not for heaven's sake but for our sakes, yours and mine. This vulgar grace is indiscriminate compassion. It works without asking anything of us. It's not cheal. It's free, and as such will always be a banana peel for the orthodox and a fairy tale for the grown-up sensibility. Grace is sufficient even though we huff and puff

with all our might to find something or someone it cannot cover. Grace is enough. He is enough. Jesus is enough.¹

What a beautiful message. What a terrifying message. It runs counter to everything we think gives order and structure to our world. And it saves our lives.

Friends, we will never be worthy of God's grace. Nothing we do can earn it, but the good news that Paul preached, and that we all stand under is this: nothing can separate us from it. Nothing.

Grace is God's gift to us, as we are and where we are- it is unmerited and unearned, and it is undeserved. It is not about how good we are. It is about how good God is.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Brennan Manning, *All is Grace*, pp.193-194.