

Learning from God's Grace

Titus 2:11-15

In *What's So Amazing About Grace* Philip Yancey retells some of Jesus' parables in modern settings. In his chapter on the "Lovesick Father" he tells of a teenage girl who grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. She viewed her parents as old-fashioned, and in her mind they tended to overreact to her music, her clothes, and her friends. After one argument she screams at her dad, "I hate you!" and decides to act on a plan she's rehearsed mentally many times: she ran away.

Even though downtown Detroit was a dangerous place for a teenage girl, she decided to go there because it was the last place her parents would look for her. Her second day there she met a man driving the biggest car she'd ever seen. He gave her a place to live and gave her some pills that made her feel better than she'd ever felt before. This confirmed what she suspected all along: her parents were keeping her from all the fun. She became a prostitute and lived an opulent lifestyle - for about a year. But when she got sick she was turned out on the street without a penny to her name.

One night she was sleeping on a vent, hungry and needing a fix, when a memory floated across her mind: "May in Traverse City when a million cherry trees bloom all at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball." Here's Yancey's account of what happened next.

God, why did I leave, she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. *My dog back home eats better than I do now.* She's sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, "Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City, and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father. "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault; it's all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?" She says the words over and over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn't apologized to anyone in years.

The bus has been driving with lights on since Bay City. Tiny snowflakes hit the pavement rubbed worn by thousands of tires, and the asphalt steams. She's

forgotten how dark it gets at night out here. A deer darts across the road and the bus swerves. Every so often, a billboard. A sign posting the mileage to Traverse City. *Oh, God.*

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here." Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smooths her hair, and licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips, and wonders if her parents will notice. If they're there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of forty brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot. They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noise-makers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads "Welcome Home!"

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her Dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury and begins the memorized speech, "Dad, I'm sorry. I know . . ."

He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."

That's the type of story Jesus told to describe the grace of God. As Yancey points out, the endings of Jesus' stories often seem too good to be true. The Father interrupts the apology because a party is waiting. There's no long lecture about all the pain the girl has caused because the father is so glad that she's finally home. That's the type of grace God has given every single person who has trusted in Jesus.

Today we are going to consider a passage of Scripture that explains how that type of grace can inform how we live our lives. If the grace we've received really is like a lavish "welcome home party," how should we live our lives in response? In Titus 2:11-15 Paul answers that question. We're in the midst of a sermon series from the book of Titus entitled "A Healthy Church." Our passage today tells us that people in a healthy church allow the grace they've received to inform how they actually live. There are certain ways of living that are compatible with the grace of God, and others that are incompatible.

Learning from God's Grace in Christ (Titus 2:11–15)

Verses 11 through 14 are one long sentence in the Greek text. In verse 11 Paul has an interesting way of describing Jesus coming into the world:

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,

When Jesus came into the world, the grace of God appeared. Jesus embodied the favor that God wanted to shower down upon humanity. By definition, this favor was something that we didn't deserve and that we could never earn. That's why grace is often described as "unmerited favor." The incarnation is an expression of God's gracious character, not our deservedness.

The grace of God - when it appeared - brought salvation to all people. Paul is saying that salvation is now available to all categories of people. We tend to take it for granted that salvation is available to all people regardless of race, class, or gender. But this was a radical idea in Paul's day; some were deemed to have an inside track to God (whether it was the Pharisees in Judaism or the emperor in the Roman system).

Paul continues by explaining that the grace of God not only brings salvation, but it also instructs us how to live. Here is where we need more than a dictionary definition of grace. We need to see the grace of God as a lavish welcome back into our Father's house. Jesus entered into this world so that every single person who wants to can enter into the safety of the Father's house; we no longer have to live "out on the street" spiritually and relationally.

12 instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age,

If we pay attention to the grace of God we've received in Jesus Christ, we will be instructed in two complementary directions. **First**, grace instructs us "to deny ungodliness and worldly desires." Sometimes "ungodliness" and "worldly desires" are so appealing. Indulging our passions seems like our ticket to fulfillment - the thing that will really give us life. That's what the teenage girl thought when she ran away from home and experienced the thrill of downtown Detroit. But the grace of God exposes that way of thinking as a lie.

Think of your favorite form of ungodliness (something that's at odds with the character of God): anger, greed, sloth, lust, envy, pride, gluttony. Think of the worldly desires that are most tempting for you (things you crave that are tied to this world instead of God's kingdom): power, money, status, etc. The grace of God appeared to free us from those things, not so that we can indulge those things. Just because grace (by definition) is free doesn't mean that God doesn't care how you live your life. The grace of God appeared so that you might live in the security and freedom of God's household. The grace of God - if we listen carefully - will instruct us to deny or say "no" to those things that will enslave us and keep us from experiencing God most fully.

Second, the grace of God instructs us "to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age." The grace of God informs us about the quality of the life we can live in Christ. "Sensibly" is sometimes translated moderately or soberly. The grace of God makes clear that in Christ we can be content living moderately and soberly; we no longer need to indulge in wild excess in relation to food or drink or sexuality or lifestyle.

“Righteously” is a general term for behavior that is upright or just. The grace of God instructs us to align our behavior with what is good and right. “Godly” refers to behavior that mirrors the character and priorities of God. For example, over and over we’re told to treat others the way we’ve been treated by God. We forgive one another because God has forgiven us; we love because God first loved us; we accept one another because God in Christ has accepted us. Such “godliness” is the only way of life that’s compatible with the grace we’ve received. This is how we live now that we’re in the household of God.

In verses 13 and 14 Paul writes that ***as we live in this present age***, we are “looking for” the age to come - specifically the return of Christ. There is a reason why almost every single book in the New Testament mentions the return of Christ. That reason is NOT so that we’ll have something to debate and argue about. The return of Christ is stressed (primarily) because its certainty changes the way we live in the present age. If Jesus really is returning, it changes everything. Notice how Paul describes the return of Christ in verse 13:

13 looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus,

Paul describes the return of Christ in two ways. First, the return of Christ is “the blessed hope.” The return of Christ is the object of our hope. Instead of pinning our hopes on this life, we recognize that when Jesus returns we will ***then*** experience the blessedness that we long for. The NT explains (in many different places) that at the return of Christ everything that has been promised will be delivered. We will finally see Him face to face (faith will become sight), we will receive our resurrection bodies (we will put on immortality - no long subject to decay and death - 1 Corinthians 15), and we will be transformed “into conformity with the body of His glory” (Philippians 3:20-21). That’s why Paul calls the return of Christ “the blessed hope” and why Peter wrote, “. . . fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13).

Second, the return of Christ is “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.” This is one of the few places where the NT explicitly calls Jesus “God.” In verse 11 Paul described Jesus’ first coming by saying that “the grace of God has appeared”; here he describes the second coming as “the appearing of the glory.” Whereas the first coming was marked by humility and obscurity (after all He came in such a way that people could ignore Him or even abuse Him), the second coming will be marked by power and glory. His “glory” will be irrepressible and impossible to ignore. People will see the “greatness” of God; Jesus likened His return to lightening flashing from east to west (Matthew 24:27).

In a healthy church, people remember that this world is not our final destination; there will be a new heaven and a new earth that is established after Christ returns. This doesn’t mean that what we do in this life therefore doesn’t matter. Quite the opposite is true. What we do in this life matters because it is a prelude to the next life. Even though this life can seem to drag on and on, it is a relatively short period of time. We

have a finite amount of time to glorify God in this life and engage in the mission He's given us. When this life is over those who have entered God's household will dwell with Him for all eternity. Those who don't want to be in His household won't be in His household. Our mission in this life involves helping others see the beauty of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and inviting them to walk with us through this life.

C.S. Lewis made this statement in *Mere Christianity*:

"If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next... It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither (p. 134)." *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis

One aspect of "aiming at heaven" is looking for the blessed hope and appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In verse 14 Paul toggles back to Jesus' first coming to remind his readers what Jesus accomplished through His life and death.

14 who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

As we've already seen, "the grace of God appeared" - not so that we can now live however we want - so that we might be completely HIS. Jesus gave Himself for us "to redeem us from every lawless deed"; Jesus' death paid the ransom price so that we are now set free from every lawless thing we've done. His death purified us "for Himself." As the parables of Jesus emphasize, our salvation restores a relationship with God. The life we live flows from the fact that we are now "a people for His own possession." In the new covenant we become exclusively His.

One of the things that is characteristic of those who are exclusively His is that we are "zealous for good deeds." Next week Brian will be teaching from chapter 3 in which Paul points out that even though we aren't saved **by** good deeds, we are to be careful to "engage in good deeds." Receiving grace doesn't mean that you're saved and so now you don't have to do a single thing. When we receive grace we are compelled to be zealous for good deeds, not because we **have** to, but because we now want to be like our Savior who "gave Himself" for others.

Notice how Paul tells Titus to make sure that people don't ignore these things:

15 These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.

In light of Paul's admonition to not disregard what he's written, I'd encourage you to ask the question, ***What might God's grace be teaching me?*** Our passage highlighted

three primary ways that the grace of God should be the compelling influence in our lives.

We saw in verse 12 that the grace of God instructs us to “deny ungodliness and worldly desires.” Perhaps God is convicting you about some aspect of ungodliness or worldliness that is lodged in your soul. You may have even thought that it’s impossible to say “no” to certain sins. Perhaps the grace God has given you in Christ Jesus is teaching you something different. Perhaps the Spirit is impressing upon you the sufficiency of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

We also saw in verse 12 that the grace of God instructs us to live “sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age.” Perhaps there is some virtue that the grace of God emboldens you to pursue. Perhaps God is calling you to be more “godly” in your family life or in your living situation. The grace of God is sufficient for every area of godliness.

We saw in verse 13 that as we live in this age, we look forward to the next - anticipating the return of Jesus. Perhaps this is a brand new idea for you, the idea of eagerly anticipating the return of Christ and living in light of His return. Maybe you need to spend some time reading about Christ’s return in 1 Corinthians 15 or 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5. Maybe you need to learn how satisfying it can be to say from the heart, “Come, Lord Jesus, come” (as in Revelation 22).

Or it may be that this morning you’ve understood the grace of God for the first time. Maybe you’ve always thought that a relationship with God was all about “measuring up” but you now realize that it’s about coming home. If you realize for the first time that Jesus died to pay for your sins and so that you might enter into life, all you have to do is receive it. Say to God, “Thank You that Jesus died for my sins. I accept His payment. I gladly enter into Your household and I want to live the type of life You created me to live.”

As we pray, let’s invite God to teach us everything we need to learn.