

Messy Grace: Serving People

Matthew 5:16; Acts 16:22-30, 20:24; Romans 3:23-24; Galatians 1:6-10; Titus 2:11-14; 1 Peter 4:10-11

Grace often invokes beautiful imagery and serene feelings, but it's not always straightforward and pretty. Sometimes it gets ugly. We don't often think about it, but sometimes showing Grace will lose you popularity contests. But I think you will find that Grace is the most powerful where it gets messy.

In this series we will focus on three aspects of messy Grace. This week we're going to be discussing how Grace can get messy while serving people. However, before we get into that, I would like to go through a crash course on what Grace is.

Grace Defined:

As I often do, I would like to visit the incorrect, preconceived notions about Grace. We often confuse Grace with just being nice, just being merciful, or with being just when it is not popular to be just.

It's a bit dangerous to confuse Grace with anyone of these good and righteous characteristics. If you're just a nice person to everyone as a default, people will walk all over you. They can take advantage of your nice nature. Your nice nature may have the opposite effect as your good intentions wind up assisting those that are both selfish and manipulative. You need to be more than just nice in order to show Grace.

Likewise, if you're only a just person, you would have to condemn everyone including you. We have all done something that has made us a problem to be dealt with. See Romans 3:23-24.

And finally, if you're just a merciful person, you will again find yourself enabling bad people. If you are merciful without conditions it only assists those who do evil. Mercy to the wolf is cruelty to the sheep. For example, something that has been popular in the news lately are Judges letting people walk free out of pity only to have the same people commit shocking crimes. Grace is more than Mercy.

Bringing it all together. Grace is not Justice, but it is Justice with a purpose. Grace is not being nice, it's being nice with direction. Grace is not only Mercy, it is Mercy with intention.

So what is the purpose, direction, and intention behind God's grace? Read Titus 2:11-14. The grace of God, Jesus' Grace, was intended to glorify God by redeeming us such that we are changed. Changed for the better. Changed for the good. Not only Mercy, but mercy that changes. Not only Justice, but heart-correcting Justice. Not nice, but good...because good isn't always nice.

I have heard Grace be given the following definition: God's favor towards the unworthy. I would modify this somewhat. Grace is God's favor toward the unworthy for the purpose of glorifying his name by fundamentally changing who we are.

Let's think back to what we talked about a few weeks ago when discussing surrender. God seeks to glorify his own name because there is no good apart from Himself. To glorify Himself in front of us, is to grant us all that is good.

Read Matthew 5:16. Grace is being nice and just and merciful for the purpose of glorifying God. It has conditions. It is not blind. It will not work against itself. The Holy Spirit that was granted to us will not work against itself.

What Does Grace Through Serving Others Look Like?:

Read 1 Peter 4:10-11. Each of us is to serve others as we are able for the ultimate glory of God. Each according to our ability, according to our means, according to our already present talents. I say already present because we oftentimes seek to replicate coveted talents. We are all going to be called to different things.

Sometimes Grace is:

- Giving
- Encouraging
- Sacrifice
- Celebrating
- Taking a hit
- Being imprisoned
- Missing an opportunity
- Being stern
- Being patient
- Mourning
- Cheering
- Silence

Let's look at some examples from the apostle Paul's missionary journeys. Read Acts 20:24. This verse sets the tone of service. Grace is at its very core a sacrifice. Granting something to someone who did not earn it, because they can change in such a way as to be worth the sacrifice.

Read Acts 16:22-24. Sometimes Grace is getting hit with 'rods'. Sometimes Grace is being imprisoned because the people you're trying to reach might not appreciate you trying to reach them. I spoke before that Grace is not meant to enable evil people. Let's not forget that Grace is also not meant to give up on evil people.

Read Acts 16:25-30. Sometimes Grace is missing an opportunity to break out of prison such that you can take a chance on rescuing your captors. It was not nice and neat. There was a violent earthquake. The guard still had explaining to do...But even though enabling evil people is not part of it, sometimes you're called to be kind to someone who's part of your problem.

For this last one I would like to talk about how Grace may need to be stern. Read Galatians 1:6-10. In this passage to the Galatians, Paul was working against a version of the Gospel where some were claiming that laws and rules must be followed and that God's grace was

not sufficient. This was dangerous in that it pushed very close to salvation being something one could earn and also close towards some people being better than others. Paul could have been nice and understanding, but that would let the problem continue. Letting a problem continue is not Grace. Sometimes you have to be stern.

To further comment on it; keeping the idea of earning salvation maximizes God's glory for the grace He has shown us. As we discussed previously, maximizing God's glory always results in the most good.

Dynamics:

I'm sure that you have noticed that in our discussion of what Grace looks like when serving others, an interesting question of Dynamics has shown up. There's an ebb and flow when it comes to Grace as there are some actions that are pleasant and others that are unpleasant although all of them are equally merciful and with purpose.

I remember in school taking a course called Dynamics. There were two courses: statics and dynamics. Statics dealt with calculating forces on unmoving objects. Dynamics dealt with forces on moving objects. In this course, it was not good enough to simply predict what would happen to a building, ship, device, boat, or landform on a good day. You had to know how something would perform when it was in motion or when its environment was in motion. You had to know what forces were at play.

Grace is also a complicated moving object. There is no one size to fit all situations. Showing Grace to others is going to involve your attention and intention. It will involve leaving your comfort zone and taking a Sabbath. It will involve forgiving and saying enough is enough. It will involve consoling and rebuking. It will involve surrender and standing your ground.

But how do we know which is which? How do we know what is appropriate for the situation? Going back to Matthew 5:16 consider: Does it glorify me, or does it glorify God? Will they see my deeds, or will they see His deeds in my surrender? Don't be a hero, be a servant.

Closing:

Grace is indeed God showing favor to the unworthy with the intention of glorifying God's name in their redemption. We must keep in mind that this does not always involve the simple charity of a Hallmark movie, but in order to keep with our purpose of glorifying God, it must involve less pleasant circumstances as well.

Reflection Questions:

- How did this message challenge or expand your previous understanding of grace? What does it mean to you that grace has *purpose, direction, and intention*?
- Can you think of a time when being “nice” actually enabled unhealthy behavior in someone else?

- Have you ever experienced grace that *changed* you, not just comforted you? What happened?
- Is there a situation in your life right now where showing grace might require discomfort, confrontation, or sacrifice?
- How can you better align your service with the goal of glorifying God rather than gaining approval from people?
- Why do you think grace requires discernment rather than a “one-size-fits-all” approach?