

Grace in Perspective

Living with Grace:

Matthew 6:33

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Sharon had no father and claimed no mother. Someone had to raise her. Someone had to provide a place to sleep, clothes to wear, food to eat, soap to clean, and help in sickness.

Although I understood her mother was severely defective, I believed she made some positive contribution since Sharon did not end up in foster care; but Sharon could see no gift at all in her mother. She found nothing to respect or affirm. She saw no grace.

Regardless, Sharon was a recipient of grace. No one can live on this earth without the care of another person. No one can live without the gift of birth, the gift of life-sustaining abilities, and the gift of a caring relationship. Those facts are undeniable. The question is whether we confuse God's instruments of life with the giver of life. For example, did Mary give life to Jesus or was she the instrument of life? Did Mary sustain Jesus' life or was Mary an instrument in sustaining Jesus' life? Who gave Jesus life? Who authored his abilities? Who sustained his life as it was threatened by the powers of death? Do you remember Joseph's dream, King Herod's plot and his family's move to Egypt? Did Mary sustain Jesus' life or was she more correctly an instrument of God's life sustaining care?

Without God's hand, Jesus would have been destroyed regardless of Mary's actions. I've witnessed that. One family was hit very hard when their five year-old hopped on his bicycle and swung out of the barnyard into the path of an approaching vehicle. A year later a sibling with flu symptoms was left in the care of an older brother while the rest of the family attended a school

event. When the family returned home, the child was near death and shortly succumbed to meningitis. All second guessing aside, with ordinary care some children thrive and some don't survive. We really don't control that, do we? We witnessed that truth at the community level when 186 children died a year ago last September after terrorists captured Beslan School #1 in Russia. There was nothing remarkable about Beslan. The kids just went to school on a normal day and never returned. I think of Jesus' response to Pontius Pilate when the ruler took an overly human view of his power to hurt Jesus. Jesus responded:

You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above...
(John 19:11, NIV)

Jesus did not see himself more loved, more cared for or more protected than any of us.

He prayed that God would so work in us that:

The world will know that you (Father) sent me and will understand that you love them as much as you love me. (John 17:23, NLT)

We are as loved by God as Jesus is. Indeed, God considered you and me worth the life of his one and only Son. Consequently, Jesus marveled at our doubt about God's love and trustworthiness. He said:

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ...And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? (Matthew 6:26-30, NIV)

We are so valuable. We are so loved. Why do we struggle to believe?

I suspect that our doubt results from two things. First, since God has put dominion of this world into our hands, we are tempted to think that it all depends on us. That was the attitude of a gardener who I have mentioned before. A preacher told him, "You and God grew a beautiful

garden.” The gardener responded, “You should have seen it when it was just God’s.” It is true that if we neglect something on this earth, it is neglected. However, we error if we think it relies solely on us. Try to grow a garden in a drought, a flood, a fire, a hail storm, an insect infestation, a fungus outbreak, a war zone, riot or gang invasion. Without the blessing of God, our efforts are futile. When Jesus told his disciples in John 15:5, “*Apart from me, you can do nothing,*” his words weren’t limited to acts of redemption by believers. He was echoing a principle of creation. No creature can do anything without initial gifts and continued blessing from the Creator. Recognizing that, Moses prayed in Psalm 90:

May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us — yes, establish the work of our hands. (Psalm 90:17, NIV)

We shine under God’s favor, and we need to recognize it. Second, our faith is eroded by the assault of evil on the righteous. Every time the innocent suffers, we feel more vulnerable. We question God’s presence, power and love. We don’t see how God has been preserving and protecting. We see and fear the destruction. We don’t see the grace that has been preventing our destruction. We don’t recognize God’s *preparing grace* that has been preparing us for life. We doubt. Are we loved? Does God’s love make a difference in what we experience?

God has nailed his answer to a cross. The truth is both in the content and method of God’s answer. It is in the content. God came to live with us in Jesus. In Jesus, righteousness and God’s compassion came to earth. It is still being tasted and making an impact. Jesus’ words, example and actions reverberate in the world. Through Jesus, God’s authority is exercised by human beings to accomplish the pure and holy will of God. Jesus was the first human to do so. Consequently, the kingdom of God has come in Jesus. There’s great healing as a result. God’s answer to our doubt is also in the method of the cross. In the cross of Jesus, God passionately acted to supply our deepest needs: love, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing,

freedom, truth, resurrection. In the cross, God signaled our desperate circumstance. The human family is helplessly corrupted and defiled by sin. The whole human race lives under the sentence of death, suffering its many deceptions and powers. But God has removed the right for our sins to hold us in condemnation, lay claim to our thinking, or determine our future. God is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse from all unrighteousness. God is faithful to release us from every hold of hell. In Christ we have *prevailing grace*.

I've watched this prevailing grace capture heart after heart and life after life here in Rochester the past five years. When it captured me, I developed an insatiable appetite to know and please God. I remember as a youth sneaking my Bible into study hall because I wanted to know God's word. I covered the Bible with a magazine so I could read the Bible without interruption. I also found myself living to please God. I wanted more than God's forgiveness. I wanted God's approval and pleasure. I pursued it.

In life, people pursue something. Some folks live for the weekend when they can party or escape. They pursue pleasures. Some people live for respect. They pursue acclaim. Some people pursue other people. They want a fulfilling relationship. Some seek validation in their work. Jesus saw people running after money, clothing, homes, and security. He admitted that many of these things are necessary to live. However, there are two things more important than all the others. Above all else, we are to seek the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. These two things are the work of God and the call of every believer.

We are to seek the kingdom of God. When God's authority is exercised by humans to accomplish God's will, people are blessed. God has given each of us talents and abilities to use on earth. God's not waiting for you to arrive in heaven to use them. We are authorized and responsible to use them now to advance God's purposes on earth. Only then are people blessed.

Like Adam and Eve we've been planted to work the garden. Jesus is telling you and me that there is great stuff to grow. We are to pursue the kingdom of God on earth. We are to pursue it in our vocation. We are to pursue it in our neighborhood and community. We are to pursue it in our families. We are to team together and use our talents and abilities in complementary ways so that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

That's not enough. We are to seek God's righteousness. God's righteousness is a gift to us, not an achievement of ours. It only comes through repentance and faith. We repent before God when we are confronted by God's word and believe it. Jesus prayed that God would make us holy. He prayed:

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:17, NIV)

As we pursue God, God pursues us. God pursues a change in us. Jesus knew that God's word, received in faith, would change us. Are you reading the Bible? Are you discussing what you read and learn with someone? Are you implementing its truths? What are you pursuing? Are you hungry to serve God?

I recently read in my morning devotions Isaiah 57:1:

The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. (Isaiah 57:1, NIV)

As I pondered the text, I realized that since we have not perished, we are not being spared from evil; yet we believers are here not to suffer it, but to conquer it. Are you engaged in conquering evil? What will you pursue with your remaining days on this earth? What will you pursue and what will you do?