

## Opening Story

We're continuing in our What's God Like series this morning and as we begin, I want to tell you a true story, that just a couple hours north of us. The story starts about three years ago, when our former Alliance missionaries who used to serve in Central Asia, Phil and his wife, JJ, moved to Chico because Phil felt like the Lord was calling him to teach. Chico State has a good teacher program.

In January of this year, Phil was at Marsh Junior High school, the first day back after Christmas Break, and the students, some known and some new, streamed into the class and took their seats. One junior high boy, sitting in the front row, was brand new to the class. He looked like maybe he was from Afghanistan, and he looked so sad and uncomfortable. Didn't speak any English. Phil knows how to speak a bunch of languages. He probably knows how to introduce himself in 15 languages or more, and he started to say 'good morning' to the students in all kinds of ways. One of the languages he said "good morning" in is so rare that there may be a half dozen people in the state, who aren't from Afghanistan, that speak it. And, when he said 'good morning' in *that* language, the eyes on the boy in the front row grew as big as saucers! Someone knew his heart language!

The boy began speaking in his native language to Phil, telling him, 'I'm new. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm scared' and things like that. And Phil told him, 'Whatever you need, I'll help you.' Phil then introduced the new student to the class and explained to them how out of place and lonely their classmate felt. Then the teacher taught the class how to say, 'Hello!' to the boy in his language.

The Principal found out about it and asked Phil if he would go to all the boy's classes, introduce him and teach the other students how to say, 'Hi' as well, which he did.

Shortly after that introduction day, the boy's parents called and spoke to Phil and invited him and his bride, JJ, over for dinner. They shared a meal, thanked Phil for loving on their son and making him feel cared for. The parents heaped praise on the teacher for the kindness shown to their son (parents love the people who love their kids!). And a friendship has developed between Phil, JJ and the parents.

If the gospel hasn't yet been proclaimed to that Muslim background family, I know it will be. Currently, there's a stream of Afghan refugees coming into Chico and the boy's parents are getting them connected with Phil & JJ because they're good, kind people.

That's grace, friends! Three years before this encounter, God took Phil to Chico. God set up the timing for this whole thing. Phil didn't know what the boy needed. The boy didn't know what Phil was going to do. But God did! A frightened, overwhelmed, Muslim boy living in a foreign land needed to be encouraged and loved—and God said, "I see you!" and made it happen. He put the right guy, with the right skills, in the right school at the right time to say the right thing so that that boy could know he was safe and among friends. The boy and his family didn't earn God's kindness. God gave it freely because He loves them and wants them to come close. And that act of grace has begun to change the contour of that boy's family and could change the lives of countless other Afghan immigrants coming into Chico.

That's grace. It changes us and empowers us to live by faith with a Kingdom heart. And it changes others, drawing them closer to God.

### **Our World of 'Ungrace'**

We live in a world, a society, a culture, of what author Philip Yancy calls *ungrace*, where everything is about your performance: what you *do*. Whether you're good enough, fast enough, smart enough. If you're a top

performer at your work, you'll get the promotion and the raise. If you're the gifted scholar, you'll get the awards and the scholarships. If you're the talented athlete or musician, you'll get fame and fortune. Our culture applauds self-made individuals, pull yourself up by your bootstraps stories, and illustrations of people working harder than anyone else to make it to the top of their respective field. In our society, you've got to prove your worth, your value, to the company, the team, the school and, often, to your family or spouse. Our society is all about working, earning, effort: doing.

Sadly, ungrace is quite at home in churches too. Not long ago in our country, and still in some places, churches were racially divided. The dominant race—whether white, black, Asian, Hispanic—doesn't want other races in their church. In many congregations, divorced people and single parents are made to feel like second-class Christians. The widowed regularly feel pushed to the outside the friendship circle because the ones who still have their spouse don't know how to deal with the widowed or are threatened by them. People regularly come to church and *pretend* to be just fine because it's not safe to share the truth of what's going on. Gossip in 'prayer' groups is a cancerous form of ungrace. Newcomers quickly learn the 'right' words to say and 'proper' clothes to wear if they're going to belong. People on the fringes of society, living immorally or with addictions, are reluctant to go to church because past experience has taught them that they need to clean themselves up before they'll be welcome. Who wants to go to church and feel worse about themselves?! Too many Christians claim God's grace for themselves but are unwilling to dispense it freely, and that hypocrisy is what keeps people from wanting to walk with the Jesus we proclaim.

Philip Yancy says it like this, "From nursery school onward we are taught how to succeed in the world of ungrace. The early bird gets the worm. No pain, no gain. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Demand your rights. Get what you pay for."<sup>1</sup> We live in a world where what a person *does* is

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<sup>1</sup> Yancy, Philip D. *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1997), 64.

more important than who they *are*. Grace is a *foreign concept*. It's contrary to how we grow up, live in society and make it in the world. It's no wonder we struggle with the idea of God's grace toward us, and why we wrestle with being gracious ourselves. So, let's talk about it. Let's talk about grace.

### **God's Grace** (Exodus 34:6-7)

John 1:17 says, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Sometimes people think that all Moses knew was the law and that the God he worshipped was all about law and wrath. People also think that the New Testament is all about grace because that's where Jesus shows up. God is law & wrath in one and grace & truth in the other –but that's not right.

Let me show you. Check out Exodus 34:6-7 [READ]

The LORD passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation." (We'll talk more about that next week.)

Our English Bibles use the words *grace* and *favor* almost interchangeably for the same Hebrew word. So, when we look at Genesis 6:8 and read that, "...Noah found favor [grace] in the eyes of the Lord," we know that grace was present before the law was ever given. And we know that God was gracious in the garden of Eden or He would have stamped out Adam & Eve the moment they sinned, ending the human race right then and there. But He didn't. Instead, in His grace, He provide animal skins to cover their nakedness. Grace is the way God *is*. It flows out of Him, and it's rooted in His love. It's not something He possesses. He has always been gracious. He cannot be more gracious or less. God *is* gracious. We know that grace is more than the prayer we say before a meal, and it's

more than the beautiful movement of a ballerina as she dances. And we know it's always been around. But what is it?

### *Grace Defined*

Grace is God's undeserved, unearned, unmerited favor. One pastor says that grace "...is the inexhaustible supply of God's goodness whereby he does for us what we could never do for ourselves."<sup>2</sup> A.W. Tozer says, "...grace is God's goodness confronting human demerit."<sup>3</sup> Theologian Wayne Grudem says, "God's grace means God's goodness toward those who deserve only punishment."<sup>4</sup> You getting the idea?

We struggle with grace because everything inside us wants to strive, to earn, to prove our worth; and having to admit that *we can't earn God's grace* really rubs us the wrong way. But when we understand how incredibly messed-up we are, we begin to realize that not only is God *loving* by offering His grace, we realize He is also *kind* because He is in *no way obligated* to do so. Look at Ephesians 2:1-3. [READ]

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of (what?) wrath."

Keep going! Now look at Romans 3:10-12 [READ]"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." Inspirational, isn't it?

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<sup>2</sup> Evans, Anthony T. *God, himself: a journey through his attributes* (Moody, Chicago, 2020), 189.

<sup>3</sup> Tozer, A.W. *The Attributes of God, Vol. 1: A Journey into the Father's Heart* (Moody, Chicago, 1997), 98.

<sup>4</sup> Grudem, Wayne Arden. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1994), 200.

Doug said last week that trying to get close to the Holy God by our own merit puts us at risk of being annihilated—like getting too close to the sun. “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2) is a very tall order and, apart from His grace, cannot, will not, happen. We are by nature objects of God’s wrath, but He pours out His grace anyway. And we can observe grace in at least three different ways in peoples’ lives.

### **Common Grace** (Matthew 5:45, Luke 6:35, Psalm 145:9)

The first observation of grace I want to talk about is often called ‘common grace.’ It’s grace made available to everyone, even if they don’t recognize it or have faith in Him. God’s willingness to restrain evil, and sin, and misery and even His own, righteous, wrath is a great picture of grace. But grace is not just about God’s restraint. It’s also about actual blessings for all of humanity that aren’t tied to salvation. Jesus said that the Father, “...causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45) and that God “...is kind to the ungrateful and wicked” (Luke 6:35). Psalm 145 says, “The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made” (Psalm 145:9). God’s grace is poured out on everyone—at least in some way.

To be more specific: Everything that people enjoy (that isn’t sinful) is a gracious gift from God—Who is the Source of all joy. A good meal. A good laugh. Singing. Creating. Reading a good book. Hard work. A hike with friends. Watching your children or grandchildren play. “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights...”(James 1:17). People enjoy God’s gifts because God is gracious in sharing them with His creation, even when people don’t deserve or acknowledge it. Each of these unearned, undeserved, unmerited favors point to the gracious Giver, like a billboard, Who is declaring His love and care for His creation. That’s common grace—available to all, and not tied to salvation.

### **Saving Grace** (Ephesians 2:3-9)

The next observation of God’s grace is one that we’re more familiar in the church, and that’s *saving grace*. Take another look at Ephesians 2:3-9

<sup>3</sup> Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. <sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by *grace* you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his *grace*, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For it is by *grace* you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. [SLIDE ONLY: delete *italics* & underlines]

God longs for spiritually dead people to become alive in Christ. When God helps a sinner recognize their deep need to be forgiven, to be made right with Him so they can be saved (what are they saved from? The wrath of God!), God gives them the opportunity to place their trust, their faith, in Jesus and what He accomplished on the cross. God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus, took the sin of every single human being upon Himself and received the death penalty that each of us rightly deserves. The sinless One took our sin for us.

Romans 6 says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v 23). Jesus took my penalty, *my* death penalty, so that my sin could be atoned for, so that I could be made right and in enter into intimate relationship with God. A grace-by-faith salvation does not begin with us; it is God’s gift. Since it is by faith, it’s not by human effort (or works)<sup>5</sup> which is why we can’t brag about how we worked it out with God through all our striving, performance and good deeds. Saving grace is unearned, undeserved and unmerited goodness from God received through complete dependence (faith) upon Him. “Salvation is transfer from death in sin to life in Christ.”<sup>6</sup> New life happens purely by God’s grace and includes being saved from His wrath. But, because of what Jesus accomplished through His death, resurrection and ascension, the believer also gains a totally new position and security in

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<sup>5</sup> Rydelnik, M. & Vanlaningham, M. *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2014), 1849.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Christ. All of this comes entirely through God's grace. And the only way to receive it is through complete and total trust in Him. It's by grace you've been saved through faith—it's a gift, not by your efforts. (Ephesians 2:8-9) "And when God shows grace to a sinner He isn't being dramatic; He's acting like God."<sup>7</sup>

The problem is that our entire world functions not by grace, but by labor and earning. And, without thinking, that's how we approach God. We think we can earn His forgiveness. We think we can work hard enough so that He can't say, "No" to us—make Him an offer He can't refuse. We do 'good things' like church and helping the hurting and volunteering at the food bank and (mistakenly) believe that we're proving to God that He should embrace us as His child and invite us into His Kingdom. But that's not how it works.

I need your input: When someone offers you a gift, what posture do you take to receive that gift? (*arms crossed, turned back, waving away*). Gifts come to those with open hands, ready to receive. If your hands are full of your own righteousness & goodness, then you've no room to receive grace. Drop whatever you're holding (your legalism, your kindness, your charity, your works) and receive His grace. It's available to anyone and everyone. No matter where you've been or what you've done, God wants to lavish His saving grace upon you if you will just stop trusting yourself and start trusting Him and what He's already accomplished *for* you.

### *Receiving Grace*

If you've never received God's saving grace and you want to, stand up right where you are. If you've never received God's saving grace and you want to trust Him, to place your faith in Jesus Christ today, just stand and if you can't stand, raise your hand. Let us see you and celebrate with you, then I want us to pray for you. He's tapping on your heart. He's revealed your need. Are you ready for His grace? [Connect Card & Pray]

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<sup>7</sup> Tozer, 106.



## *Celebrating Grace*

Listen to this from Romans 5 [READ]

"For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Romans 5:10)

When we receive His grace by faith, we are no longer God's enemies; we're His children (John 1:12-13). We're no longer objects of His wrath, but recipients of His gracious forgiveness and cleansing, having been made holy and indwelt by His Spirit.

Quickly, look at Psalm 103:8-12. Follow along with me. [READ]

<sup>8</sup>The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. <sup>9</sup>He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; <sup>10</sup>he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. <sup>11</sup>For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; <sup>12</sup>as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

So, if you have this living, dynamic relationship with God, rooted in His grace, (some of you just started this) listen to what you get to enjoy (v 11-12): a love from God that is so expansive that it fills every possible space. That's how much God loves you! How high are the heavens above the earth? That's how big His love is for you! *Just because you're His*. You didn't do anything to deserve it! Does that blow your mind? How far is east from west? He's got you going one direction and your sin in the other. He didn't just forgive you of your sin (which is huge!), He removed it! He took it away and set it off in a direction where you'll never have to look at it again and, more importantly, neither will He.

Salvation: We don't deserve it and we didn't earn it. Let me hear you if you're grateful for His saving grace!

**Enabling Grace** (Acts 4:33-34)

We recognize God's undeserved, unearned, unmerited goodness in different ways as we observe it in different situations & circumstances. I've talked about common grace and saving grace so far but, to be clear, it's all, simply, *grace*.

I want to highlight one more facet of His grace this morning and I call it Enabling Grace. Pastor Anthony Evans writes, "God has supplied every true believer with a magnificent provision: His inexhaustible supply of goodness called grace. We cannot earn it, we do not deserve it and you can never repay it, but He has made it abundantly available for free."<sup>8</sup> So, grace isn't just about demonstrating His loving-kindness to the world in general, and it's not just about grace that leads to salvation through faith. Grace is also God's power for living the Jesus life.

Look at Acts 4:33-34 [READ]

"With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all<sup>34</sup> that there were no needy persons among them."

Do you see it? Great power was given to them—God's grace was powerfully at work in them to do what He's called them to do. So how was that grace acquired? By what means did the Apostles get their hands on that grace for powerful ministry? By faith! Grace is always received the same way—by faith—wholehearted trust in God.

Your work, your effort, your power, didn't save you and your work or power won't sustain you. He knows you couldn't save yourself, so He did it for you. He also knows that you can't walk in faithfulness with Him and minister in your own strength—so He gives you His Spirit and *abundant grace*. Remember, it's always our tendency to move towards effort, performance, self-power to accomplish. But that's not possible when it comes to the things of Jesus. The *only* way to live the life of Jesus, to minister in the name of Jesus, is through grace by faith in Jesus! He must

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<sup>8</sup> Evans, 186.

empower you. It must be *His* enabling, *His* Spirit at work in you—giving you what you do not have, cannot have, on your own.

Look at Romans 1:5 for a moment. It's written by Paul, the guy who had a monstrous, life changing encounter with Jesus and was radically saved.  
[READ]

"Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake."

Grace and apostleship came together: God's grace for salvation and God's grace for Apostolic ministry. The grace and the calling go together.

Here's what I want you think about: If you're a Christ-follower, saved by grace through faith, what, in His grace, is He calling you to? Apostleship for Paul. Definitely not for me. My calling by His grace to serve as a pastor, a shepherd. You may be called by grace to be a godly mom, or student or engineer or server or programmer or salesperson or widow or business owner or investor or grandparent or single person or teacher or manager or dad. But hear me: "There is not a role in life that can be lived the way God wants it lived apart from enabling grace. Being a godly mother or being an apostle is impossible without the power of grace."<sup>9</sup>

You weren't saved by God's grace so that you could live the God-life in your own strength and power. That can't be done! We need to continue to be recipients of God's grace by faith, every moment of every day. That takes practice. Some days I'm okay at it. Other days I think, "I got this" only to clearly demonstrate that I *do not*. God has called you to Himself, saved you by His grace through faith and will enable you to live a new life in Him, with His priorities, values and Kingdom in mind—but only as you continue to receive His grace by faith.

If you feel ineffective in your calling, whatever it may be at this time, ask yourself: 'Am I trying to do this in my own power and strength? Or am I

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<sup>9</sup> Piper, John. "By His Grace, for His Name, Through the Obedience of Faith." *Desiring God*, 10 May 1998, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/by-his-grace-for-his-name-through-the-obedience-of-faith>

trusting God to do this in me by His grace?’ Remember, if your hands are full of your own performance, ‘I got this!’, then there’s no room to receive God’s grace. So, every day, as you spend time with Jesus, empty your hands, and remind yourself that your calling, and this Kingdom adventure, can only be accomplished through His enablement—only by His power—and that you can only receive that grace as you trust Jesus to supply it. We have to rely on His grace, constantly placing our faith, our trust, solely in Him.

### **When Grace is Present**

As we become people who live by our faithful dependence on Jesus and His enabling grace, things begin to change: Marriages bloom as we lean into God’s great provision and trust His goodness. Relationships with parents, children, coworkers, classmates and extended family begin to transform because grace is increasingly present. Our attitudes and actions become shaped by grace and begin to look more like those of Jesus. Our effectiveness in our calling increases because we’re enjoying God’s enabling goodness as we trust Him moment-by-moment.

Imagine how much more our church could impact our community and the world as we lean into God’s grace, trusting Him to give us all we need to love others with the love that’s been lavished upon us—as we become, even more, the dispensers of God’s unearned, undeserved, unmerited favor to the broken, lost and lonely. What if Foothills Church was so steeped in the grace of God because we’re trusting Him to empower us to live for His glory, (so steeped) that people who are far from Jesus, unaware of God’s grace at all, can’t stay away? Philip Yancy captures my heart in this quote, “Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it and I am one of those people. I think back to who I was—resentful, wound tight with anger, a single hardened link in a long chain of ungrace learned from family and church. Now I am trying in my own small way to pipe the tune of grace. I do so because I know, more surely than I know anything, that any pang of healing or forgiveness or

goodness I have ever felt comes solely from the grace of God. I yearn for the church to become a nourishing culture of that grace.”<sup>10</sup>

## **Wrap**

Imagine what your life will look like as you trust Jesus each day and embrace His grace just like you did when you received it by faith for your salvation! No holding back. No reservation or hesitation. Just a desperate need to trust Jesus to do for you what you know you could never do on your own.

God’s grace—an extension of His love and goodness—giving us what we don’t deserve and could never earn—just because He loves us. You began your Jesus journey in His grace. Rest in His grace each moment, trust Him to give you all you need, in every situation, struggle, celebration or confrontation. He wants to give you what you don’t have so that you can live the life He’s built you to enjoy for His glory and for the sake of those who don’t yet know Him. Grace, Grace, God’s grace...

## **Pray**

For the new believers, for all of us, to trust Him completely. Wholehearted faith each day.

For those who ache and trust that Your grace is sufficient for them.

For those still far from Jesus: may Your grace be so evident in us that they long to know You.

## **Bless & Go**

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord look on you with favor and give you peace.

Remind: tithes and offerings in boxes in back. Want to talk or Pray? Come on up.

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<sup>10</sup> Yancy, 42.