

Luke 4:14-30**Grace is Free**

We are going to Luke 4 today.

Last week we read the account of the temptation of Jesus. He was led into the wilderness by the Spirit of God to be tested by the devil. And Jesus passed the tests that everybody else had failed, and from there, having proven Himself qualified, He began His ministry.

The story we'll read today took place about a year after His temptation. Luke doesn't always put the stories in strict chronological order. It generally flows in order but sometimes he'll flash forward a bit.

So in the year before this part took place, Jesus was in Galilee. According to John's gospel, He performed His first miracle there, turning water into wine. He called his disciples. He met the woman at the well and healed the son of a nobleman. He cleared the money-changers out of the temple for the first time (he does it again later.) He taught Nicodemus at night, telling him you must be born again. So it has been an eventful year.¹ And it was a year in which Jesus got pretty famous:

Luke 4:14 And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country.

The greek word for "report" there is *feme*, which is often translated fame. The fame of Jesus had spread. The miracles were talked about everywhere, but the main emphasis of Jesus during that year was his teaching ministry, and the power of his teaching was also a major reason for that fame:

Luke 4:15 And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

¹ For more on the chronology of the life of Christ, a helpful chart can be found here: <https://aschmann.net/BibleChronology/ChronologyOfTheFourGospels.pdf>

So the focus of Jesus' ministry during His time in Galilee was teaching in the synagogue².

It's important to keep the synagogue and the temple separate in our minds. There was one temple, in Jerusalem, it was huge, all the Jews in the world would try to get there occasionally. The sacrifices were offered there, the priesthood was centered there.

But in every town where there were 10 adult Jewish men, a synagogue would be formed. Synagogues were very similar to what we would think of as churches and formed a pattern for how most churches function today. They were the religious and social hub of the Jewish community in a town.

The central event in the week at the synagogue was the service on the Sabbath day. And while worship customs grew and developed over time in the synagogues, what never changed was that the center of the service was always the reading and teaching from the Torah (the Old Testament.) The reading of scripture and the sermon were primary elements in their gathering.

Someone would stand up to read from the scroll the passage was written on, and then sit down to preach the sermon on that text. And that was the work that Jesus focused on in his first year of ministry: traveling from town to town and preaching in the synagogues.

And doing that work made him a celebrity preacher that year and his fame spread far and wide. And now in verse 16:

16a And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up.

So Jesus goes home to the small town of Nazareth. And when someone in a small town gets famous, it is a huge deal. Everybody tells their stories about times they interacted with them when they were kids, everybody feels a sense of connection. His fame is kind of our fame.

In the town I grew up in, Orchard Park, we didn't produce that many famous people from our high school. But there was one guy. William Sadler. Now that name may not ring a bell, but he graduated from OPHS and went on to huge fame in Hollywood, playing the role of the Grim Reaper in *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*.

² Jesus was often called a teacher in the Gospel accounts, and at this point if someone were to refer to Jesus by his career, like we often do, saying someone is an engineer or a doctor, they would have said Jesus is a teacher.

Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey came out when I was in Junior High, and we saw him on the big screen and knew we could be anything we wanted to be. A local boy became that famous. (He was also the character Heywood in *Shawshank Redemption*, and president Matthew Ellis in *Iron Man 3*. Now you see why we're so proud of him.)

But you feel a connection to the local who becomes a celebrity. He's our guy, he represents us, when he thinks of his people he thinks about us.

And here in the small town of Nazareth, Jesus has come home. So there is a buzz in town. "They're saying Jesus might be the Messiah."

It would be great for all of us if He were the Messiah. He's going to be speaking at his home synagogue, the one where he grew up, maybe the one where He went to school and grew in stature and wisdom before God and man. So there's probably full attendance there that day.

16b And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.

Just as a side note, notice that it was *his custom* to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. Jesus made it a custom to go to church - to participate in weekly worship with God's people. Certainly there were problems with the synagogues. Obviously Jesus had his disagreements with synagogue leaders, the people weren't always friendly (we'll see here that he kind of has a bad church experience in this passage.) He always knew the Bible better than the speaker. But his custom was to participate in weekly worship.

And, I know you're here so this is preaching to the choir, but there is huge value for us and our families in making weekly worship with God's people a custom. In our day we can be very against routine, we think we should only do things because we are passionate about them, and never just because we always do them. And it is true that we should want to have hearts engaged, we should want passion that lines up with the truth, and should confess the ways we are lukewarm and not feeling it.

But humans aren't always be as passionate as we should about things. Sometimes we just do what we always do. And routines, customs, are important. We need a trellis and a vine - the trellis is the structure, the vine is the life, and the life of faith grows on, among other things, the trellis of weekly worship. So if you say "I follow Jesus but don't go to church," you should actually follow Jesus to church. Go where he goes!

Anyways, Jesus stands up to read.

17 And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

So Jesus reads a pretty obscure passage from Isaiah, one where a servant of the Lord is described, one with the Spirit of God on him.

20 And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

So Jesus sits down to preach the sermon and they are staring at him. They already know that this passage sounds a lot like Jesus, and people are saying He might be the Messiah. So they are staring at him: what is he going to say about that passage? Could it be that the local boy from Nazareth is that guy? Did something good actually come from Nazareth? So Jesus preaches his sermon on it:

21 And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus doesn't hold back. He reads the scroll, they are silent, and wondering, and waiting, and He breaks the silence by saying, "Yep, that's me." "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Nice short sermon (not everything is the same in church as in the synagogue,) and Jesus makes clear that He is the one that passage is talking about. And the people are thrilled:

22 And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

They marvel at his gracious words and say, "And he's our guy!"

This means that finally they are going to get what they deserve and be liberated. The local boy has made good and this is the year we finally get what is rightfully ours.

They were the good and faithful people, oppressed by Rome, captive to a foreign power. They will get liberty. It will be the Year of the Lord's favor, or the jubilee year. This was the year that only happened once every 50 years where, according to God's law, all the land would go back to the original family it was designated to. And Rome has owned their land and oppressed them, but this would be their year, they think.

Finally the good people will get what's coming to them. They've been going to church every week, learning the Torah, trying to obey it, trying to be faithful. They're good clean church-going types. But life has still been hard for them. So finally God will answer their prayers and give them what He owes them.

So they love the sermon. They're thrilled at His words.

As a preacher, I love it when people love the sermon. I want everyone to think it's engaging and true and I want it to point to us all to Jesus. I work on it all week and I want it to be good. So I love hearing when someone loves it. A few weeks ago Cody preached and on the way out the door someone stopped me to tell me how much they loved my sermon that morning. And I just went with it - I'll take it!

But when a preacher cares about the reality of what they're preaching, there is a nagging fear that comes with it all.

We can love to hear the word taught, but miss the message altogether. We can listen and learn truths, but not grasp the reality of them so that we're gradually changed by them. We can love going to church, learning the word, hearing the preaching, but not sense our constant need to repent and turn to Jesus.

Not everybody who loves church or loves the sermon loves the Lord. Not everybody who hears and loves the message truly receives the message.

King Herod, for example, the guy who eventually has John the Baptist beheaded, used to gladly hear John the Baptist preach (Mark 6:20), even though John was calling him to repent and he never did. He loved to listen to the preaching, he was probably moved by it, but was unchanged by it.

There's a story of *Ben Franklin* going to listen to George Whitfield preach³ - Whitfield was a preacher in the first Great Awakening in America. And Franklin loved listening to him

³ <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/ideas/text2/franklinwhitefield.pdf>

preach because of his eloquence, and was so moved by a sermon at one occasion that even though he had resolved that he wasn't going to put anything in the offering at the end, he emptied all the money he had on him into the offering plate afterwards. But Franklin never believed. He just liked the sermon.

Plenty of people go to church and love the messages, but miss Christ altogether.

And Jesus here isn't needing praise for his great preaching. He wants changed people. And he knew that this nice, welcoming, sweet, church-going people were missing His point. He isn't satisfied with pats on the back and a hero's welcome from people who don't get what He's doing. And he's not going to let them walk out of church thinking they're OK when they're not. So He stirs the pot:

Luke 4: 23 And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well." 24 And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. 25 But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, 26 and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. 27 And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." 28 When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. 29 And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. 30 But passing through their midst, he went away.

So the people, at first, love what He has to say. Then he says something that is so wildly offensive to them that the good, clean, church-going people who are so proud to have Jesus back home with them turn into a murderous gang that tries to throw Him off a cliff.

What He says brings out rage in the nice sweet church people in Nazareth.

And when verse 29 says they drove him out of town, it's a word that is used in the Greek Old Testament to describe ridding a city of a plague (Leviticus 14:40)⁴. This is disgust language - they are disgusted with Jesus, they want to treat him like a disease. The same word is used to cast out demons - this is like an exorcism for them. They really see Jesus as evil because of what He says here.

⁴ *ekballo*

So what was it?

What makes the guy who runs a small group in his house, and the lady who runs the VBS, and all of those people who worship so sincerely every weekend try to chuck Jesus off a cliff?

What makes a saintly grandfather in the pew join a riot chanting “death to Jesus!” What makes the lady who teaches Sunday school classes about Elijah and Elisha on the flannel-graph say “I want him dead”? What sends a “church” into murderous rage?

We’ll spend the rest of the time trying to answer that - but as we do, let’s avoid the big mistake we make when we read the Bible. We tend, when we read a biblical story, to identify with the good guys. And we treat the bad guys like they’re the crazy others, and we would never do those things. It’s easy to read this as a story about a bunch of crazies from the country in Nazareth. But these are church-going people who like a good sermon. They gather to study the scriptures every week. They’re us.

Which means we might have in our heart the same thing they had in their hearts that made them marvel at Jesus one moment, but in the next want Him dead.

What does He say, and what does reaction reveal about our hearts?

23 And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well."

So Jesus says to them, “Here’s what you’re going to say to me. **“Physician heal yourself.”**”

It’s a common proverb - if you can heal others, let’s see it, heal yourself. And they extend the proverb a little by saying, “If you are doing miracles for those other people out there, do them here!”

If you’re doing miracles for these other people in these other towns who have no claim on you, do some for us. You’re our boy - you learned in the synagogue school right here. We raised you. Your dad made all the furniture here in our synagogue. You used to eat at our potlocks. You’re ours. We deserve you. So give us what you owe us.

So Jesus responds by reminding them of two bible stories:

24 And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. 25 But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, 26 and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. 27 And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

So Jesus tells two Old Testament stories. (He says, "remember what you taught me!")

First he tells them the story of Elijah during the famine. For three and a half years it didn't rain. People in Israel were dying, they were crying out to God for a rescue. So God sends Elijah the prophet to provide food for the hungry.

But He sends him to Sidon to a widow woman to provide food for her. And we read that quickly in the Old Testament, but Sidon was not part of Israel. It was Phoenecian. And the Sidonians were evil - they kidnapped Israelites, Jezebel, the wicked queen was from there. They didn't even worship the true God, they worshipped a nature god. And there were many widows in Israel, good jewish ladies during the famine who needed help, but God sent Elijah to Sidon. To a lady who certainly didn't deserve a rescue. Plenty of "our people" needed help but God sent a prophet to "one of them."

Then he tells the story of Elisha. He was another great prophet that God used to do miracles. And there were lots of sick people in his day. At the time, leprosy was not curable, it was a death sentence. It permanently isolated you from the community, you had to go off and live in a leper colony while you slowly fell apart. And there were so many faithful jews with leprosy. But God sent Elisha to heal Naaman. The *Syrian*. He was not only *not Jewish*, he was the captain of the army in Syria, the enemy army. But God sent Elisha to heal *him*.

In both stories, the people that we think are deserving of God's blessing don't get it. And the wicked people who deserve wrath get grace.

And when Jesus tells these stories, they get mad:

28 When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath.

They're angry because they think they deserve God's grace, certainly more than the outsiders in other towns without the same claim on Jesus. And by telling these stories Jesus tells them they're not going to get it. Like everyone else in the Bible who assumes they deserve a blessing from God, who assumes they can control God, who assumes that God is somehow in their debt, they are going to get nothing from Him.

They think that they're the good ones. They're deserving. They have the lineage ("we are sons of Abraham!"), they have the claim to Jesus, they are getting together to worship and read scripture every week, they're tithing to make church possible, they're the good church-goers, so surely God owes them something. But when God shows up and doesn't give them what they think they deserve from Him, they are angry at God and want him out of their lives.

This story is told over and over in the scripture.

This is the same thing that happens in the story of the prodigal son. A man has two sons. One son runs off and squanders his inheritance with crazy living, then comes home and the father throws a party with a great steak dinner to celebrate. But the older son, the good son, the one who stayed home and worked dutifully, is furious - *because he thinks the father owes him something*. He has served faithfully and never gotten a goat from his dad, so he's angry. He's angry at the father for not giving him what he thinks he deserves.

And this story plays out in our lives too. We go to church for years, we serve God faithfully, we study the scriptures, but He never gives us the spouse we've been praying for. Or we are faithfully following Jesus and trying to follow the commands, but all the promotions at work pass us by and we watch the wicked prosper. Or we do everything right in our dating life, we stay pure, but still the marriage is a huge struggle. What do we do then? Often, there's rage at God.

Underneath all of that service and effort was a desire to get God to do what we wanted, and when He has the nerve to act like He has free will and He doesn't owe us anything, we want that God out of our lives. Chuck Him over the cliff.

How many in our day walk away from Christ because He doesn't give them what they think he should!

So often we're like the older son. So often we're like the Nazarenes. So often, good clean religious people are masking an anger at God who is not coming through.

And what Jesus says pops that balloon.

Jesus says God is free to do what He wants. He says grace from God (God's gifts) is given freely, not because God is under obligation.

This is what Jesus wants us to hear today, I believe. Grace is free.

Grace is free. It can't be deserved or earned or demanded. Grace is a gift.

If you think you deserve God's grace, you don't know what grace is.

And you don't know yourself very well either. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. He never owes us anything.

And there is never anything we do that puts God in our debt, or that gives us the right to make demands of God.

Grace means we don't have rights before God. Grace means that God is never obligated, never in our debt, never restricted, and totally free. Grace means God has free will.

But when good church people hear that *nothing we do* makes us OK, no obedience makes God owe us anything, and that we are utterly dependent on a free God who gives grace where He wills, we can get mad. Because we lose our control. We lose our ability to tell God what to do.

And this is such a danger for us, for the church people. We can think that all of our singing and tithing and serving and working and opening our homes and studying our bibles and praying and mercy work and evangelism can earn us God's blessing.

And we can think that God is in our debt because we are so good. But if God owes us something, it isn't grace at all, it's a debt. And God is not anyone's debtor.

In fact, when we do good to get God to do something, it is a subtle attempt to get God in our service. To switch places with God. To become the one who can call the shots, while God is the one who does our bidding.

We never think this through all the way, but often we are being good because we want to be God. We want to be in control of God.

But Christians are people who are always utterly dependent upon God's grace.

Good clean people can hate God's grace, because they don't want to acknowledge that what they need from God is something they don't deserve, something they could never earn, and that whether or not they get that blessing is completely out of their control.

Good clean people often avoid repenting and trusting in The Savior because they think they are already ok because of their moralism and religion.

They miss what grace really is. And Jesus won't allow it.

- He won't allow us to go through life thinking we *deserve* God's grace, while at the same time somehow thinking we are the ones who don't really need it.
- He won't allow us to look at other people as the ones who *really need God's grace*, but at the same time don't deserve it like I do.
- He won't allow us to go through life deluded into thinking that I'm so awesome that God owes me one.

And He is willing to lose a lot of friends and garner a lot of enemies to make sure we know what grace really is.

Because people who think they're OK on their own miss God's grace altogether. But the ones who recognize that they are totally unworthy of it are the only ones who can receive it.

That was actually the point of the passage Jesus read:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Jesus is bringing good news to the poor, the oppressed, the blind, the captives. He is preaching good news to those with nothing.

Now we might read this and think that this means the Gospel goes only to the materially poor. Now being poor can certainly be a humbling factor that makes you feel need. When you're rich, you get used to opening all the doors you want with money. You can do things because you can pay for them. You can hire the right people, buy the right things, you can get used to making demands and having demands met because you can write checks. You can feel very self-sufficient and in need of nothing. So being rich like most of us are by global standards can have a dangerous numbing effect.

But remember that when Jesus told the two stories, he told one about a poor woman receiving grace. But the other was about Naaman, a rich and powerful man, who received grace. So by preaching good news to the poor, Jesus isn't saying He is only preaching and offering grace to the materially poor.

He is saying He is only offering grace to those who recognize their poverty. And that can be you whether you're worth millions or if you'd have to win the lottery just to get up to broke.

Jesus is not preaching that in his kingdom only the physically poor are in and the rich are out.

But he is also making clear that in his kingdom it isn't that the good and moral are in and the immoral are out.

In his kingdom, the humble and broken are in, and the proud are out.

If we recognize our sin and our need for grace, that's when we are eligible for grace. But if we think we're pretty good on our own, we miss grace altogether.

So maybe you're here and you're not a Christian. And the reason for that is you don't think you qualify. I haven't kept the commands. I haven't been good. Jesus has good news for the poor in spirit. He offers you forgiveness. Grace only goes to those who know they need it, so you may be much closer than you think.

Or you're a Christian, but man you've strayed. It has been so long since you were consistent in prayer and Bible reading. Your passion has grown cold. Sin has crept in and you've chased it farther down the road than you ever thought you would. The life you thought you would have in Christ hasn't materialized, and maybe because of your own sin you feel like you're sitting in a pile of rubble that you've created.

There are broken relationships, broken trust, broken commandments, you're reaping the fruit of sin in your life. You're complacent and cold, you feel so stuck, so addicted, so frustrated. Jesus proclaims liberty to captives.

Your faith seems so small and doubts are so large, you don't see Him like you used to. Jesus proclaims recovery of sight to the blind.

If you recognize your desperate need for God's grace, you're a lot closer to Him than you may think you are.

St. Augustine said, *"To desire the aid of grace is the beginning of grace."* If God is stirring in you a desperation, a sense of need, a sense of helplessness, a sense that I'm like a leper with a disease that can't be cured unless He's merciful, then there's good news for you.

But if your religious practices and moral obedience are making you smug, or arrogant, or feeling entitled, if you are getting angry at God for not making your life better when you've earned it, you are forgetting what grace is. And you're more like these Nazarenes in the synagogues that the widow at Zerephath or Naaman. You don't find God's grace if you think you deserve it.

It really is infuriating for someone whose bible knowledge or religious achievements have been their identity to realize they are no better off before God than someone who hasn't given the effort. It is difficult for someone who has raised their kids right and made the sacrifices, for someone who has resisted temptation, for someone who hasn't cheated at life to think that the cheaters can receive the same grace I can.

But that is what the Gospel means.

It means grace is a gift.

And that's a gift that came at a great cost.

Jesus said to these people at Nazareth, "doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, Physician heal yourself."

And I think the reason Luke flashes forward here and tells this synagogue story early is to make it the book end on one side of Jesus's ministry, with a complementary book end and fulfillment at the other side.

In Luke 23, Jesus is being led off to be crucified.

Luke 23 33 And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. 35 And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!"

Here, as he hangs on the cross, the moral religious people are saying, "Physician, heal yourself. You've saved others, show your power and save yourself." There they are again, not understanding what He is doing.

He is dying to provide for grace.

He knows that our morality and religion won't get us to Him. So He lays down His life to provide the only thing that can. The pure and holy son of God has to die the death we deserve to pay our price. And no amount of rule keeping could ever pay for that, so He doesn't ask us to. He is paying the wages of sin so He can give us the free gift of eternal life.

And that life only goes to those who so recognize their poverty that they say, "I need that!" I need a radical rescue. I need the Savior to give His life for mine.

And if in our sense of poverty, and captivity, and brokenness, we turn to Him for a totally undeserved rescue, we will find grace.

Sermon Notes:

Luke 14:14-30

Grace is Free

- I. Grace is Preached (Luke 14:14-21)
- II. Grace is Celebrated (Luke 14:22)
- III. Grace is Rejected (Luke 14:23-30)

Questions for Discussion in Small Groups

1. What is grace?
2. Why is God's free grace often frustrating to the moral and religious?
3. What do we deserve from God?
4. What is the role of morality and service toward God if it doesn't earn us His favor?
5. If good, clean, religious people can miss grace, how should we then live? What is the Christian alternative to that?

Scriptures Referenced:

Luke 4:14

Luke 4:15

Luke 4:16a

Luke 4:16b

Luke 4:17-19

Luke 4:20

Luke 4:21

Luke 4:22

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Luke 23:33-35