

Displaying God's Grace

Galatians 2:9-16

Looking back on the last 20 years of being a Christian, the happiest and most powerful periods - were when God's grace was my focus. Not how to bring revival, but how He loves me.

Grace is a message to be digested and a lifestyle to be practiced.

This letter Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia was written with the hopes to see hearts set free by the grace of God.

God's Grace sets hearts free from:

- **Self-hatred and self-righteousness.**
- **Unfulfilling and anxious religious striving.**
- **Divisions that come from elitism.**
- **And sets you free to just be you.**

There was a survey done: **“How many of you would rather get an electric shock or be by yourself for half an hour with no distractions and no sleep?”** (67% of men and 54% of women want the shock over the removal of distractions).

When the heart is set free by grace, you can be by yourself and in quiet and enjoy that time. Set free to just be a human being, not a human doing.

Luke, one of our young men who joined the Navy, loved the 30 minutes of solitude in boot camp, because He would soak in the presence of God and in the grace of God, while others are in torment. God's grace sets you free to just be.

“9James, Cephas (Peter), and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised.” (Galatians 2:9)

Those were the pillars in the church, which means that the church is not a building. It's the people. The people are the pillars of the church, not wood and steel. A church is as strong as the pillars.

Two facts about pillars:

- 1) **Pillars are consistent. Pillars can't be relocating every Sunday from one building to another.**
- 2) **Pillars are committed. Pillars uphold the house rain or shine, not just when they feel like it.**

I want to thank God for all the pillars at our church, because if it wasn't for the pillars, this church would have caved in. Jesus Center is a great church not because of the pastor, but the pillars. You know who you are, you care for the church and therefore feel the weight of the church.

Perhaps, this has been a place of shade for you. It's been a place of refreshment, a city of refuge, and maybe even a school of the Holy Spirit. This church has been a blessing to hundreds of people in the South Bay and beyond (perhaps in the next five years- it will go from hundreds to thousands), and yet Jesus Center would have crumbled to the ground if it wasn't for the consistent and committed pillars.

The larger a church gets, the more pillars are needed. A church of 10 pillars can only reach 80 people. A church of 30 pillars can reach 240 people. We can only reach as many people as our pillar count allows.

Do you remember how Samson killed thousands of Philistines, they hung him on two pillars (show picture) and yet those two pillars supported the entire edifice- so when he pulled down the pillars, the whole edifice caved in and everyone under the covering died. If that edifice had hundreds of weight-bearing pillars, it wouldn't have mattered if two were displaced.

A church should have pillars everywhere, not just one or two.

Over the years I've seen three types of people...

3 Types of People in Church:

1) **The Patient.** They are looking for the best ministry in town that can meet their needs- I have nothing but compassion for them, they should find the best doctor/hospital they can, their needs are real, their hunger is valid).

2) **The Position-seeker.** They are looking for a place to display their gifts and want to be in a place of prominence. I'm not antagonistic towards these people, they feel they have a lot to offer and want to offer it somewhere. Or, they really want to be a leader or an integral part of something dynamic and promising.

3) **The Pillar.** The pillar rarely complains that you aren't feeding them well enough or spending enough time with them. They probably won't ditch you for the newest, hottest church in town. They aren't those who will ditch you if you don't promote them fast enough or be offended if you shift their roles or you promote someone else. They are just consistent and committed. They aren't divas. They are the ones that make a church healthy and the very reason why a church will flourish. Then, the Lord may lead them to another house, and most likely they will be pillars everywhere they go- because it's who they are. It's not always easy to be a pillar, but it may be most fulfilling. Position-seekers leave a vacancy, but pillars will leave a legacy.

“10All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.” (Galatians 2:10)

Why should we remember the poor?

Remembering in the Greek means “to benefit or care for” and not just to think about. It's not a mental action but to be a lifestyle. It is implying that we be in relationship with the poor.

Being in relationship with those who can't benefit us materially, who are failures and rejects, is a picture of the gospel of grace.

For we could not benefit God materially- for He owns it all, and we too were failures in our own narratives and no strangers to rejection- and yet God wants to be in relationship with us.

When we chose to be in relationship with the poor, we are training ourselves to not see people as means to our greeds and lusts, but seeing people as valuable human beings, not as opportunities to take from, but to add to.

The leading philosophers of their day believed that the mighty gods don't interact with measly humans. The rich gods don't interphase with poor humans. But that wasn't the message of the Christians, they taught that:

“we know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that although he was rich for your sakes became poor, so you through his poverty might be made rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9)

The gospel is that we have a great God who loves being in relationship with measly humans, we have a rich God who loves giving to poor humans, making them rich in Him.

The poor speak of those whose lives are falling apart, perhaps because of unfortunate circumstances or even their poor choices.

Our God doesn't just pursue those who have it together, but those whose lives are falling apart. Jesus said he didn't come for the healthy, but for the sick.

- There were women who lost their husbands and now these widow could no longer support their kids.
- There were kids who were on the street because their parents were murdered or went to jail.
- There were men who contracted diseases and could no longer work to support the family.
- When tragedy hits a life, we are to be the hands, feet, and face of Jesus and display the mercy and compassion of God! Let them know, by our actions, that they are not forgotten by God. We are to display God's grace.

What is our attitude towards those who are morally poor?

- Did Jesus reject the morally poor or remember them? Jesus didn't reject those who were morally poor, but remembered them: The prostitutes, adulterers, tax-collectors, were among those He ministered to, hence collecting the label "Friend of sinners."
- It's sad that often the attitudes of Christians towards those who are morally poor are more reflective of the Pharisees than Jesus.
- I'm not saying we condone all destructive behavior, but we ought to value human beings for being made in the image of God. People ought to feel valued in our presence. **Are my attitudes and actions towards people inconsistent or consistent with God's?**

Ron Jeremy and Craig Gross, ABC news called them the most-odd couple in America (show picture):

“(They debate each other on college campuses, one is pro-porn and the other is anti-porn.) Yet the two have become fast friends. In fact, Jeremy hangs out at Gross' house with his family, but the pastor's kids are in the dark about what "Uncle Ron" does for a living....Since then, the odd couple has spent countless hours on the road together, preaching different gospels, and along the way, became friends....Their friendship deepened this January, just before Jeremy's 60th birthday, when he was rushed to Cedar Sinai Hospital in L.A. for emergency heart surgery for an aortic dissection. Jeremy nearly died, but before surgery, one of the few calls he made was to Gross. "I said to Craig, this is the exact conversation, 'Craig, are you free for a couple hours?' He goes, 'yeah.' 'Are you still close to God?' He goes, 'last time I checked.' 'Well, I would like you and him to come down to Cedar Sinai Hospital, I'm going through a life-threatening operation,'" Jeremy said. Gross said his conversations with Jeremy are usually light-hearted, but this time, he knew something was seriously wrong. "There was something different," Gross said. "He said, 'Craig, I'm scared, and I don't want to die.' And he said, 'will you pray for me?'" After a 14-hour surgery and a lengthy hospital stay, Jeremy pulled through. He has a long scar, which runs from his chest to the right side of his leg, to prove it. Jeremy said he is a changed man, in part because of what he has learned from Gross. "I think maybe I'm a product of successful prayers," he said. "I had experiences that definitely made me believe in God ... there's no other explanation."

I wonder if people (all kind of people) feel valued in our presence. I wonder if we reflect God's heart for people to people.

Culturally, the rich didn't interact with the poor- they wouldn't have much in common.

Yet, in remembering the poor, Paul was going to break down the walls of social class differences, "I know in the world, the rich and the poor don't hang out...but in Jesus you are my brother, you are my sister, and I'll take care of you, I'll eat with you."

In a multi-cultural church like ours we have many cultural differences- yet those difference don't have to divide- we may not have much in

common on the outside, but we have so much in common within- we have Jesus, we have the love of God, we have the gospel of God's grace. We are like a multi-vitamin, not just Vitamin C or Vitamin B or Vitamin A.

The early church had what they called a love feast, the whole congregation would come together to enjoy a common meal provided by the pooling whatever resources they had. The slaves, it was the most decent meal they had all week!

The church was a spectacle to the world because people from all different cultural backgrounds and social classes would be able to eat together, something that was unthinkable!

What we are going to do in a few minutes is a wonderful expression of how Jesus can take people from different walks of life and shades of skin and make us into one family- where we may don't have much in common on the outside, but so much in common on the inside.

“11But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. 13And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” 15We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.” (Galatians 2:11-16)

Let's dive into the background.

The Jews - for the most part- believed they were the chosen people, and there was an exclusivity to their religiosity, and it led to the rejection of all other kinds of people. Unless the people decided to “pay the price” and become one of them, namely via circumcision, they believed they were superior. God chose the Israel, not because they were better, but they were

the weakest, and God wanted to show them grace and make them a light and blessing to the Gentiles, but they missed the point- and felt they were far-superior to others because of what God did do among them. They were exclusive and rejecting.

These were common statements of beliefs the Jews promoted, according to Professor William Barclay:

- **“The Lord is merciful and gracious but he is only gracious to the Israelites; other nations he will terrify.”**
- **“The nations are as stubble or straw which shall be burned...”**
- **“If a man repents, God accepts him, but that applies only to Israel and no other nation.”**
- **“Don’t help a Gentile mother, we don’t want her to bring another Gentile sinner into the world.”**
- **“Love all but hate the heretics.”**

They would not do business with “outsiders”, they didn’t give hospitality to or get it from Gentiles (which was how Jesus rocked the boat in Samaria, when he talked to the Samaritan woman. She was shocked because she knew Jewish men to be snobby towards all Samaritans.).

All his life, Peter was taught that Gentiles were dogs and unclean- yet, in Acts 10, he has an epiphany from God where he is enlightened to see that he can’t keep excluding those God is including. He realized that God’s heart was bigger than his. Peter understood the true message of how God’s grace was extended towards all and how Jews were not better than the Gentiles, that God accepted all of them and was going to all His Spirit to work in and through them.

That was the message that Peter believed it, preached it, and fought for it. He was a real pioneer! Peter was the one who preached to get the church launched and now Peter was the one used to get the church diverse. Don’t pick on Peter, he was the best God had to work with.

Now, Peter is visiting Paul’s church in Antioch, his home base was Jerusalem. Peter is having a good time laughing with the Gentiles and having a wonderful time of fellowship. He went to their homes, he feasted with them, he treated them like FAMILY.

Then, Peter saw the Jews come from Jerusalem, he pulled away- stopped eating with the Gentiles because he was trying to avoid conflict.

Sometimes as a leader you just don't want to have to fight on so many fronts. You get tired of attacks and criticisms. You just want some peace and quiet. He didn't want them to nag him about why Jews shouldn't eat with Gentiles - unless the Gentiles are circumcised.

So he just ate with the Jews after that, but everyone noticed that change in Peter's behavior. The Gentiles were wondering if God they were still in the family of God. They were wondering if they were still just UNCLEAN DOGS, they respected Peter, but Peter was making them doubt their identity. Even the best of God's people, can have a bad day, and make poor choices with detrimental ramifications.

Peter made a decision out of fear of people verses personal conviction. We know this because Paul says that Peter was playing the "hypocrite" which implies that he was just acting like the Gentiles were not on the equal level of the Jews, even though he didn't believe it.

To be a person of integrity, which is opposite of hypocrisy, we have to live out our convictions- whether popular or not.

But, I think some of us are difficult to live with because have far too many convictions about subjects that aren't even that important and essential- and you don't bend at all. I'm not advocating that either. Some of us can and should be more flexible.

Some of our beliefs and preferences are NOT WORTH THE FIGHT, but some of them are.

What I'm trying to say is:

Some people don't know how to fight for anything.

Some people fight about everything.

We should be neither.

Don't make molehills out of mountains and mountains out of molehills.

Yet, the problem in this passage is that Peter was bending on the essential GOSPEL MESSAGE.

- It wasn't a matter of service times for church.
- It wasn't a matter of where they church is going to meet.
- It wasn't a matter of what kind of programs the church is going to run.
- It wasn't a matter of whose on church staff.
- It wasn't a matter differing opinions of church government structures.
- It wasn't about secondary theological issues.
- His weak actions were a direct attack against the essential gospel message.

- **This is what Peter's actions communicated to the entire church, "THE GENTILES AREN'T PART OF THE TRUE CHURCH AT ALL, EVEN THOUGH THEY LEAN ON JESUS. BECAUSE JESUS ISN'T ENOUGH FOR SALVATION, IT MUST BE JESUS + JUDAISM. YOU HAVE TO CONVERT TO JUDAISM, GET CIRCUMCISED AND KEEP THE LAW, OR ELSE YOU ARE NOT IN GOD'S FAMILY, YOU ARE STILL AN UNCLEAN DOG."**

- Peter's actions were promoting a false gospel, which lacked grace.
- The false gospel will always breed religious elitism, which will then bring division.
- People who call themselves Christians yet have a sense of spiritual elitism and lack compassion for other believers- may be believing a false gospel. Not the gospel of God's grace, but of our works (in this case, our nationality).

God designed it that those who are going to be in right relationship with Him, come into that relationship, by throwing themselves upon His grace and mercy, because He wanted us to become more humble and loving as we grow in the knowledge of His ways.

Does our belief system make us more humble and loving? If the answer is no, could it be that we have subscribed to a false gospel?

Spiritual growth must be marked by a growth in humility and love, or it's not spiritual growth, but spiritual retardation.

Do you see why Paul had to speak up?

This wasn't a trivial issue.

This was Paul's turf, he had to protect his flock!

If Paul didn't speak up, Peter's actions would continue to destroy the true message of the gospel and divide the church. Peter was now treating the Gentiles as if they were just "dogs" and still "unclean".

They were doubting their worth.
They were doubting their salvation.
Paul had to remove that stigma from the Gentiles.

The good news is that we are not "dogs" and "unclean"- the good news is that we are in the family of God, not because of our performance, but because of His grace.

I feel for Peter, when you are in leadership, you feel like a pinball, everyone is trying to influence - you according to their exceptions and preferences. You can't please everyone. Peter is trying his best to steer clear of the Jewish Party from Jerusalem and then he has a run-in Paul- and Paul yells at him in front everyone!

Peter can't win.
People-pleasers can't always win.
Since we can't all please the people, just please God.
Then you are a winner.

When it comes to more trivial issues, its OK to remain flexible, when it comes to the gospel of grace and how we will see and treat people, we cannot play chameleon.

Peter believed in God's grace to all, but Peter wasn't displaying grace- his actions were inconsistent with God's heart and message.

Before we pick on Peter for being fickle, remember he was still the one God picked, which tells me God only has imperfect people to work with, so don't let that reality disappoint you. But before we throw stones at Peter, let's check our own hearts and lives:

"Are my attitudes towards people, consistent with God's heart?"

That's where Peter missed it. He was treating the Gentiles as unclean dogs, when they were beloved sons and daughters of God.

I think we have all failed to present God accurately.

- Do people feel valued in our presence?
- Do we display the grace of God?

The Jews thought to themselves, we have been circumcised, and they don't have it, they don't do it, hence we are better.

We too need to watch out for a sense of superiority based on what we have- that someone else doesn't have, and what we do- that someone else doesn't do.

It may not be circumcision now, it may be:

I speak in tongues.

I lift my hands in worship.

It may be that I read my Bible everyday.

It may be that I have the perfect theology.

It may be that I never smoked.

It may be tithing.

The list goes on and on and on!

Living a Christian life may mean we are better off, but not better than.

Any theology that doesn't make us more humble and loving at the end of the day, is warped and wack.

True theology, the true gospel, will empower us to display God's grace.