

Amazing Grace II:
Growing Deeper
October 13, 2013

Drama – “The Next Step”

Isn't it funny how awkward it can be sometimes to build and maintain a relationship with another person? As the drama just illustrated, it seems that guys have an especially difficult time with this. Women seem much more skilled with this kind of thing. Yet regardless of your sex, building relationships can be both difficult and awkward at times.

Now if you think it's awkward for two guys who already know each other, imagine what it must be like to build a relationship with someone you cannot see, feel, hear, or touch? Imagine how unnatural it must feel for a new Christian to build a spiritual friendship with the invisible Almighty God?

It shouldn't come as a surprise to us that for many Christians, it's a struggle to know how to relate to an invisible God. What are you supposed to do? You can't loan him your drill bits or offer him your John Deere mower. Where do you begin? How do you develop a grace-based relationship with a loving Heavenly Father who's so "other-worldly"? These are challenging questions and I hope to answer them today as we talk about what it means to grow deeper into grace.

Review

If you're new or haven't been here in the last month, I want you know we are currently in the middle of a series of messages about the "Amazing Grace" God's offers us in Jesus Christ. In Part 1 of this series, we focused on what it means to *BELIEVE IN* God's "Amazing Grace". We learned that because of what Jesus did on the cross and in His resurrection, you and I do not need to do anything – ever – to gain his approval.

God has already done everything for us even though we do not deserve it and could never earn it. And He offers it to us with no strings attached.

We don't need to clean up our act beforehand or even promise to try to clean up our act afterward in return for his grace. All we need to do is believe. We do nothing other than believe that Jesus died for us and rose again. That's it. This is the overwhelming testimony of the New Testament. This is the Gospel. This is the good news.

In Part 2 of this series, we are focusing on what it means to *LIVE BY* grace. The main thrust of Part 2 is that the grace of God wasn't just given to save us but also to change us.

It's important to understand that our desire to change and obey is a by-product of receiving His grace. God plants the seed of salvation in us

and that root will naturally begin to produce the fruit of a life pleasing to Him.

Therefore, our motivation to please God comes from our love for Christ and what he's done for us, not from fear or from a need to perform for God.

God's love for us inspires love in us and action from us. The bottom line is this: grace produces love and love produces action.

So if it God's grace that produces love, the question is: how do we grow deeper into grace? That's the question Rick left with us as we ended last week's message. That's where we'll begin today.

Relationship Basics

In order to grow deep into God's grace, we must cultivate a relationship with him. As our relationship with God grows, so will our understanding of the grace he offers us.

Therefore, building and maintaining a relationship with God is foundational to growing in grace. But as we witnessed in the drama, relationship building can be difficult even in human relationships, let alone spiritual ones.

Question: What do YOU think is the key to building deep, meaningful relationships? I believe it takes a minimum of three things:

- close proximity: spending time together*
- environment of trust: mutual love and acceptance*
- open communication: transparency with one another*

While I'm sure there are more things we could list, these three are important if you want to a close relationship with another person.

About 10 years ago, Norma and I were

enlightened about how to develop close relationships while we were attending a Christian counseling conference in Nashville. During one of the sessions on marriage, the professional Christian counselors who were presenting asked the audience: What's the ONE factor that lowers the divorce rate in married couples more than anything else? (i.e. 50% down to 17%) I had no idea.

Answer: When couples pray together.

Couples who regularly prayed together were significantly less likely to get a divorce than those who didn't. I was surprised by that statement. In fact, I was taken aback by it. As I began to think about our marriage, it dawned on me that I rarely prayer together with Norma except at meal times. Sure, we both prayed separately to God, but we rarely together and we had been married at that time over 20 years! I was so challenged by this idea that when we got back home, I asked Norma if we

could find a way to incorporate this activity into our lives.

Three things had to happen in order for start praying together: we needed a time, a place and a plan. We decided that our time would be early morning, our place would be our neighborhood, our plan would be to walk 2-3 times each week and discuss a series of seven questions and pray together as we walked.

So here are those seven questions.

What has God been teaching you lately?

What is your greatest joy?

What is your greatest struggle?

*One thing I love about you is...
(character quality)*

What have you been dreaming about lately?

How are you doing physically?

What should we be praying about?

*How can we pray for one another?”
(which was followed by a time of prayer
together)*

This new “discipline” was a big step for me because I am not a morning person. Up to that point, I rarely ever exercised in the morning. As we started this new routine, it took me a few weeks to adjust to walking and having a meaningful conversation with Norma at 6 o’clock in the morning. But before long, I was used to it and began to look forward to it.

Faster forward to today. We’ve been practicing this “discipline” for well over a decade now and there’s no question that God has used it to grow and deepen our relationship more than anything else.

But there’s one thing you need to know: we didn’t start praying together out of fear of divorce or out of a sense of duty. The motivation was love, pure and simple. We did it

because we love each other.

Relating to an Invisible God

By now you're probably wondering, "What does all this have to do with growing deeper with God?" The connection is this: Growing deeper with God is a lot like growing deeper in a human relationship. It requires some intentional regular disciplines for it to grow.

The disciplines needed to connect with God are similar but slightly different than those practiced in human relationships. That's why they're known as "spiritual disciplines". They are called "spiritual disciplines" because they help us connect with a spiritual being, God that is, who we cannot physically see, feel, hear or touch.

As I said earlier, connecting with God poses a challenge for many Christians. Many people feel awkward when it comes to relating to God...kind of like the two guys in the drama. If

that describes you, you are not alone. In fact, there's a story in the bible about a woman who was struggling with this very same thing.

In the NT book of John, we read about a Samaritan woman who didn't know how to properly relate to God. She came to Jesus confused about where her people were supposed to worship. As a Samaritan, her people worshiped God in a different place than the Jews did. Listen to how she presents her dilemma to Jesus.

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." John 4:19,20

At this point, Jesus corrects her and explains that it is not about *where* you worship, but about *how*. In the Old Testament, a person

could only get near to God in the temple and only the high priest was able to enter in. The Samaritans worshiped on the mountain where Moses sacrificed to God, again making the place the significant part of worship. But Jesus said:

"Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." John 14:21-24

The time Jesus was referring to came in the book of Acts. After Jesus died and rose again,

He sent His Spirit to indwell all believers. Now we no longer need a temple (or a mountain) to worship God for every person in which the Holy Spirit resides IS the temple of God.

Therefore, our relationship with God is all about us connecting with the Holy Spirit who lives in us. Though we can't see the Holy Spirit, we can still relate to him. As the passage we just read points out, since God is Spirit, we must relate to him as spirit. That's why we call these intentional activities "spiritual disciplines". They are uniquely designed to help us connect with the Spirit of the living God who lives in us.

What are Spiritual Disciplines?

By now I'm sure you're wondering, "what are these 'spiritual disciplines' and how do they work?"

In order to fully grasp the nature of spiritual disciplines, we need to first understand the

concept of discipline. Dallas Willard says that discipline is

an activity within our power--something we can do--which brings us to a point where we can do what we presently cannot do by direct effort.

Willard says discipline is a natural part of the structure of the human soul, and almost nothing of any significance in education, culture or other attainments is achieved without it. Everything from learning a language to weight lifting depends upon discipline. My prayer walks with Norma were a form of discipline.

If we want to grow in any area of life, including our relationship with God, it will require some type of discipline.

I think one of the best illustrations of the importance and value of discipline is found in

the classic 80's flick, "The Karate Kid". For those of you who can remember, this movie was about a handyman/martial arts master, named Mr. Miyagi, who agrees to teach karate to a young bullied boy named Daniel. When Daniel shows up for his first karate lesson, he is surprised to discover that Mr. Miyagi seems much more interested in teaching him household "chores" than self defense. As you watch this next clip, pay close attention to "the deal" that Daniel commits to.

Play: Karate Kid Video Clip #1

Daniel initially agreed to "the deal" with Mr. Miyagi, but it wasn't what he expected. In his mind, he was there to learn karate, not to wash cars and paint fences. He quickly became sick and tired of all the useless chores he was assigned to do. And just as he's about to walk out on his agreement, Mr. Miyagi demonstrates to "Daniel-son" the value and purpose behind the repetitive, mundane chores. Watch.

Play: Karate Kid Video Clip #2

Unbeknownst to Daniel, all these “useless” chores were bringing him to a point where he could do something that he couldn’t before do by direct effort.

As he practiced the disciplines of “wax on, wax off,” his muscles were being strengthened and his reflexes were being trained for karate. These mundane chores made Daniel free to fight.

In a similar way, spiritual disciplines (which appear rather mundane in and of themselves) free us to connect with God, and help us to grow deeper in grace. They embed the motions of the spirit within our bodies where sin once was in control.

You see, a balanced set of spiritual disciplines can serve us well and are essential to the

development of our relationship with Christ. While they are by no means all that is involved in growing deeper in grace, they are indispensable. They do not take the place of the movements of the Holy Spirit in our lives. But neither will the Spirit take their place. With a little bit of instruction, each of us can begin to incorporate some of these “disciplines” into our lives so that we can do something that we cannot do by direct effort: grow deeper into God and his grace.

Now before we look at the various types of spiritual disciplines, I want to offer one warning: Discipline is a good word.

But it's a word which needs careful navigation, because it can so easily turn into legalistic ritual.

A legalistic ritual is what you get when you practice a discipline and lose sight of its purpose. The purpose of spiritual disciplines is

to connect with God, not to try to impress him or earn his favor. Disciplines can easily degrade into a system of performance, where we attempt to earn “brownie points” with God. Once that happens, they cease being “spiritual” and all you are left with is “discipline”.

As we been saying for the last several weeks, we don’t need to do anything more to gain favor in God’s eyes. We are already loved and accepted by him because of our faith in Jesus. Therefore, the reason we practice spiritual disciplines is simply to connect with God out of gratitude in our hearts for what He’s already done for us. To quote my good friend Warren Wade, spiritual disciplines are just a door which we can walk through to encounter God.

Just be careful. Don’t let these disciplines turn into legalistic rituals. With that said, let’s turn our attention to the disciplines themselves.

The List of Spiritual Disciplines

The list of disciplines we are looking at today isn't exhaustive. There are more of them than I'm showing you today. But these will get you started. They are typically divided into 2 categories: Disciplines of Abstinence and Disciplines of Engagement.

First, let's look at the

Disciplines of Abstinence. These are ways of denying ourselves something we want or need in order to make space to focus on and connect with God.

Solitude: Refraining from interacting with other people in order to be alone with God.

Silence: Not speaking in a quiet place so that we can quiet our minds and attend to God's presence.

Fasting: Going without food (or

something else) for a period of intense prayer.

Sabbath: Doing no work to rest in God's person and provision.

Secrecy: Not making our good deeds or qualities known so that God or others receive attention.

Next, let's take a look at the Disciplines of Engagement.

Disciplines of Engagement. These are ways of connecting with God and other people, communicating honestly with them in order to love and be loved.

Bible Reading: Reflecting on the words of Scripture.

Worship: Praising God's greatness and goodness using music, ritual, or silence.

Prayer: Talking with God about what we or others are experiencing.

Community: Spending time with other Christians for spiritual encouragement.

Personal Reflection: Paying attention to our inner self in order to grow in love for God, others, and self.

Service: Humbly serving God by helping where needed or showing compassion to those in need.

The Quiet Time

By now, I'm sure some of you are thinking, "Wow. This all seems a little overwhelming. How am I going to fit any of this into my already busy schedule?" If that's how you are feeling, I totally understand. But let's stop and think about your busy schedule for a minute.

In your busy life, how do you currently make time for the ones you love? How do you make time to be with your wife? Your kids? Your best friend? I'll tell you how you do it. You

prioritize. You say “yes” to Friday date nights with your wife and you say “no” to all the other people wanting your attention. Or you say “yes” to the early morning walk and you say “no” to sleeping in until 7am. It’s all a matter of priorities. We must make time for those we love, including our gracious Heavenly Father.

Now, if you are feeling overwhelmed by all this, I’d suggest you start small and experiment. Try one out. See which discipline helps you to connect more deeply with God. If I had to make a recommendation for everyone in this room, I’d recommend starting with the “Quiet Time”.

The discipline of Quiet Time isn’t on any of the lists that I showed you a minute ago. That’s because the Quiet Time is actually a collection of four disciplines rolled into one. It’s typically a combination of solitude, bible reading, personal reflection and prayer. I like the Quiet Time because it’s a high leverage spiritual activity that doesn’t take a large amount of time. By simply investing 15-30 minutes a day in this activity, you can grow deeper roots into

grace. In order to better understand the discipline of the Quiet Time, I thought it would be good for us to experience one together.

The Quiet Time Experience

If you have a program, go to the middle section. There you will find a helpful model that can be used for your Quiet Time. The model is developed around the acronym “S-O-A-P”.

“S-O-A-P” stands for Scripture, Observation, Application, and Prayer.

I want us to walk through all four of these together in the remaining time with have. After the end of the prayer, the band will play a song and then I come back for some closing comment.

First, let’s begin with Scripture. Let’s together read out loud the passage listed in your program.

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”
Matthew 11:28-30.*

Now, take a minute to write down an Observation. A quick way to do this is to rewrite the verses in your own words.

Here’s what I came up with.

Observation: “Are you tired? Worn out? Come to Jesus. He’ll show you how to rest. He won’t lay anything heavy on you. The more you give your burdens to Him, the lighter you’ll feel.”

Now, take a minute to write down a personal application...some action you might take in response to what you just read.

Here's my application:

Application: I need to quit trying to live life in my own strength and turn my cares and worries over to Jesus in prayer.

Now, take a minute to pray silently and ask God to help you live it out.

Prayer: Take time and ask God to help you live it out.

Song: "Grace" by Laura Story

Closing Comments

Connecting with God doesn't have to be awkward. When you set aside time for spiritual disciplines like solitude, bible reading, and prayer, you are prioritizing your relationship with him just like you do with your wife, kids or best friend. And as the song you heard just said, "Don't forget. God loves you and what's a

relationship with you. And if you're seeking His face, you'll walk in the power of His daily sufficient grace." Let's pray.