

Well it's that time again - NY resolutions time. Even if we have given up on making a list there is still something about a new year that provides a little motivation to change, change habits, change our circumstances, or change our attitude. There will be a lot of changes in 2016. We will change presidents. No applause, if history is any indication, it won't be long before you don't like the next one either. Diets will change. My family will change. We look forward to welcoming a new grandson into the world in May. Some of you will change jobs, change neighborhoods, and of course you WILL NOT change churches! 2016 will bring 365 days of change. So this morning I want to focus on one thing that will not change – our calling, our purpose on this planet - to glorify God every day in 2016. Can you be more specific? Yes, I can. Turn to John 1:14-18.

You and I were created for the glory of God. God's ultimate goal for His people is that we would bring Him glory. But what does it mean to glorify God? GLORY = visible manifestation of the invisible God. God has no hands or feet so He created us to be a visible expression of His nature and purpose. What does that look like? John says Jesus is the visible manifestation of God. But v. 18 makes it clear that "no one has seen God at any time." So how did John know Jesus was God? What convinced him? Was it Jesus' personality? Was it the miracles? Was it the way He treated people? John gives us two clues – grace and truth. Those who glorify God have a firm grip on grace and a passionate commitment to truth. Those who are champions of grace and guardians of truth accurately reflect what God is like. We will look at grace today, truth next Sunday.

All man-made religions are built upon human effort. We must work our way to God. Our default internal operating system tells us we must earn our way in life. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Everyone gets what they deserve. That's only fair. This mindset is propped up by American folk religion that produces stories like the frog that fell in the bucket of milk...the only way out of a bad predicament is to work your way out.

The natural man is always at odds with grace. Grace is too easy and sometimes seems unfair. Remember the story Jesus told about some men who worked all day for a wage and others who worked only one hour getting paid the same wage? Those who worked all day said, "That's not fair." Jesus concluded the story with the words of the employer, "Am I not permitted to do what I want with what belongs to me?" Grace is unmerited favor. We don't deserve it so it stands to reason that we can't earn it.

Grace is unnatural to the natural man. One writer has observed, "Because grace is so incomprehensible to us, we bootleg in conditions so we won't look so bad and God's offer won't seem so counterintuitive. By the time we are done qualifying the gospel, we're no longer unworthy and powerless. We're 'misguided souls.' We're no longer wretches. And grace is no longer grace." Alcorn, p. 35

So what is grace? Let's begin with what it is NOT.

Grace is not gap insurance...makes up the difference between all I can do and all God requires me to do.

Grace is not tolerance. I have been in some circles where people excused irresponsible, even immoral behavior, by saying, “We are about grace.” That’s not grace, that’s tolerance, not a biblical tolerance but a worldly tolerance. Tolerance, according to Dorothy Sayers, is “the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.”

So here is my simple definition of grace. GRACE IS GOD DOING FOR US WHAT WE COULD NEVER DO FOR OURSELVES. What are some things we can’t do for ourselves? We can’t be saved, sinless or selfless. That’s why we need God’s grace.

By grace we are saved. Eph. 2:8-10 God gives us grace to BE His people.

By grace we are taught to obey. Titus 2:11-13 God gives grace to OBEY His Word.

By grace we serve. 1 Pe. 4:10-11 God gives grace to DO His will.

God gives us grace so that we can be His people, obey His word and do His will. John refers to all these things as “grace upon grace.” (v. 16). We should be optimistic about 2016 is because, regardless of the conditions in this world, you can look forward to “grace upon grace,” one act of God’s grace being replaced by another act of God’s grace.

The world does not need a definition of grace, they need a demonstration. The best way to get a handle on grace is to see it... 2 Sam. 9. Mephibosheth was five years old when his father was killed and his grandfather, Saul, committed suicide. (2 Sam. 4:4). He was with a babysitter when the news of their deaths reached his home. The babysitter, fearful that the murderers would come for the boy, picked him up and set out to hide him in a safe place. In her haste she dropped him. He survived the fall but he would never walk again. Let’s pick up the story in 2 Sam. 9.

After King Saul and his three sons were killed in battle by the Philistines David became King of Israel. (8:15). As he begins to put his administration in order, he asks if there is anyone left from the house of Saul. There is only one – Mephibosheth. M., the son of David’s good friend Jonathan, is disabled since his fall as a child. The story of M. is a portrait of God’s grace. This story highlights three important dimensions of grace.

1. Grace is Unmerited....vv. 1-4. M. didn’t earn or deserve the kindness David extended to him. In fact, he couldn’t have served the king if he had wanted to because of his disability. He couldn’t fight for him, work for him, or even bring him his breakfast. M. was dependent upon others. David did for M. what M. couldn’t do for himself. Why?

God is gracious to us not because we deserve it and not because He pities us. It is not even because He loves us. It’s deeper than that. The OT word is *hesed* or lovingkindness. It is sometimes defined as “loyal love.” In 9:1 David asks, “Is there anyone left in the house of Saul that I can show *hesed* to for Jonathan’s sake?” The grace David shows M. was based on a covenant David and Jonathan made with one another, “The LORD shall be between me and you, and between my offspring and your offspring, forever.” (1 Sam. 20:42). In showing *hesed* to M., David is simply fulfilling the demands of a covenant relationship with Jonathan.

God's grace is not based on our goodness. God's grace is based upon a covenant between God the Father and God the Son for the redemption of the human race. Before the foundation of the world God determined that creation would not be destroyed by sin, but that rebellion and iniquity would be overcome by His grace. God appointed Jesus to be the mediator between God and man who would be the perfect sacrifice for the salvation of the world. Jesus promised to do the work the Father had given Him to do and fulfill all righteousness by obeying the law of God. Jesus came to save the world, to become Head of His body, the church, so that God would be glorified. As Jesus glorified God He was glorified by God, resurrected and seated at the right hand of God. (Philippians 2:5-11 and Is. 53:12). Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. In spite of the fact that I was actively rebellious or passively indifferent to Him He was kind toward me and saved me. Like M., my disabilities make it impossible for me to earn His favor. Grace is unmerited.

2. Grace is Unexpected... vv. 5-8. M. approached David expecting the worst. In the Ancient Near East it was a common practice for victorious kings to exterminate any surviving family members from the previous dynasty in order to remove the threat of an insurrection.

Grace runs counter to everything we have been taught in our culture. It runs counter to everything that was taught in Jesus' culture too. The reason He was always at odds with the religious leaders was because they were repulsed by His acts of kindness toward the undeserving. They didn't expect that, neither do we.

3. Grace is Unfathomable... vv. 9-13. M. must have thought, "Why me?" Have you ever wondered that? Why did I lose my job? Why did my husband leave? Why did our child rebel? Why do I have cancer? Why me? God's ways are unfathomable but so is His grace. M. asks, "Why me?" (v. 8). The answer is grace.

So I want to invite you to do two things as we close.

Get grace. There are two prerequisites - humility and weakness. "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble." James 4:6. God's grace is freely given to the humble. Have you ever noticed that Jesus reserved his harshest judgment for religious people. Yet He lavished His grace upon pimps and prostitutes. Why? Because those who were on the margins of polite society were honest about their condition. Humility is not putting yourself down it's simply seeing yourself for who you are. It's being honest with God about your faults. That is why confession and repentance are so important.

God's grace is also freely given to the weak. "'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." 2 Cor. 12:9
Humility is voluntary, weakness is involuntary. There is nothing you can do about your weaknesses. It may be an illness, like Paul, it may be a physical flaw you were born with, it may be mental or emotional. In our high-tech world we expect all flaws to be fixed. Surely there is a scientist, an expert, a guru, someone who has a pill for my flaw. Then,

when we come to the end of ourselves, we must hear the very words of God, “My grace will be all-sufficient.”

No one wants to be weak but God is glorified through our weakness. My weakness is a platform for God’s strength. Hudson Taylor was once asked how China Inland Mission had thrived under his leadership. Taylor replied, “It seemed to me that God looked over the whole world to find a man who was weak enough to do His work and when at last He found me, He said, ‘He’s weak enough. He’ll do.’”

Give grace. As we go through 2016 one thing will not change - you will never look into the eyes of someone who does not matter to God. Every person you encounter needs to not only know about God’s amazing grace but they need to see it. “By grace you have been saved” and we have no right to withhold that grace from others. They won’t deserve it. They don’t expect it. They can’t fathom it. But that’s what makes grace grace.

We are all modern-day Mephibosheths. Some disabilities are more obvious than others but make no mistake, we are all living with a limp. God, in His grace, invites us to His table. When we participate in the Lord’s Supper we confirm our faith in His plan. Communion is not a means of grace but a response to grace. So come, receive this gift of God’s grace.