



Changing Your Thoughts, Bettering Your Life

Are Your Thoughts Helpful?

When I was finishing my college career, I had come to grips with the realization that God wanted me to be a pastor. It was not something that thrilled me, I wasn't following in the footsteps of any of my family members. The truth was, I had a rather real fear of public speaking. In high school I took a speech class and I was thoroughly traumatized by the experience. My pastor quite kindly asked me if I would preach a sermon when I came home on Christmas break and it was a terrifying offer. Looking back, as a pastor for three decades now, I know how risky it is to ask someone to preach for you, especially someone who has never done it before. It is no small matter having a guest speaker because you can't have any certainty what you will get, especially if you have never before heard the person give a sermon. The preacher might be terrible and you might have to answer to the church for letting him speak. Of course it could go the other way. The sermon might be so great that the congregation will start wishing your guest speaker were the pastor instead of you. In this case, the pastor had no reason to worry about me taking his place. I was terrible. And the sermon only lasted six minutes. For that he was probably quite thankful...as was the rest of the church. I learned an important lesson about grace though. Both the pastor and the church asked me to preach again the next time I was in town.

Grace is one of the great words of Christianity. It translates a term found throughout the Greek New Testament, "charis". It has been described as, "the action of one who volunteers to do something which he is not bound" to do. Charis speaks of favor, gracious care or help, goodwill. Grace is kindness offered with no strings attached; unearned and most likely also undeserved. Paul the Apostle famously stated, "**For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—**" (Ephesians 2:8 NIV) Grace and gift are almost synonymous. In fact, in the Greek language, they have the same root. Grace is a gift, a favor granted to you.

In a way, law and grace are opposites. Law is a locked in, predetermined approach to what someone has done. It is cause and effect. You do this, here is what you face. Grace on the other hand is wild and unpredictable. It is not connected to your actions and is out of your hands. You cannot know what to expect from grace until it's offered. The metaphor of law is the funeral. Funerals are always about death, seeping dread and sadness. The ceremony is usually solemn and although in modern times humor is sometimes brought into it, there is nothing really funny or pleasant about a funeral. It is the anticipated outcome of being caught in the vice grip of the law of sin and death. The metaphor of grace is Christmas. For a child, Christmas is full of joyous anticipation, a celebration of birth. Grace is fresh hope, new life, generosity going too far.

Let me illustrate from my life the difference between law and grace. When I first started driving, my parents let me use the family car. However, within only a couple months, I got into an accident and damaged not only their car but also two others that had suddenly stopped in front of me. My dad would no longer let me drive his car. I deserved to have my driving privileges revoked and that was law. However, very soon a neighbor asked if I wanted to buy his car. It was the coolest car I could imagine having and it felt like Christmas when I bought it. That was grace.

Two examples from the Bible also clarify the differences between law and grace. Before Israel had a king, there were a series of leaders who helped prevent the nation from being completely overrun by neighboring countries. One such leader was Jephthah. When the Ammonites threatened to conquer Israel, Jephthah was asked to lead the army in defense of the country. The danger was great though and Jephthah made a vow to God that if the Lord gave him victory, whoever greeted him first when he returned home from battle he would offer as a burnt offering sacrifice. I'm guessing Jephthah thought it would be his dog or rooster but it wasn't, it was his daughter. He though kept his commitment and had her killed and burned on the altar. If we just ignore for a moment that God is completely opposed to human sacrifice and by fulfilling his vow Jephthah was actually breaking the law of God, the action Jephthah took was an example of law. It was a cause and effect response to a locked in place outcome or so he thought. He won his fight so his daughter had to die.

In contrast, when Ruth decided to leave her hometown and all her friends, leave her culture and her family behind to support and devotedly love her mother-in-law by moving with her to Bethlehem in the foreign country of Israel, she did so without being coerced into it. Her sacrificial love was wild and unpredictable, an unexpected turn by a woman of growing faith. It was grace. A completely undeserved but freely given act of love. Grace cannot be explained in mathematical formulas or in rational ways because the cause and effect universe has no place for it. The mother who really does forgive the killer of her daughter is not rational. The boy who is about to win the state championship one hundred meter race but stops to help up his competitor who has tripped and fallen is not rational. The doctor who gives up his thriving practice to go help the impoverished in Sri Lanka is not rational. Grace does not make sense to cause and effect thinking because it seems too much, it is taking love too far. But that is how God is, loving us "more than He should".

Jesus once told a story about how God thinks. He said there was a man who had a hundred sheep but one wandered away. He left the ninety-nine on the hills and searched high and low for the missing one. When he finds that lost sheep, he will celebrate like mad he has her back. Jesus then made this astounding point about you. **In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.** (Matthew 18:14 NIV) When you see each person like God does, as a lost sheep who needs to be brought back home, it reshapes your thinking. If you realize every sin is a forgivable offence and grudges wreck the good grace does in you, then you are starting to see things as God does. Grace is God's answer to sin and evil. It is His fight plan against death and it is how He reveals Himself most powerfully through His people. You can see grace in a thousand different ways working around you if you are watching for it.

There is no rational explanation for why Jesus Christ died on the cross to take your sin from you and consequently remake you into someone who will eventually become perfect in every way. It is just how God is. Grace. Realizing that Christ loves you beyond your ability to comprehend and that He sees you as of infinite value despite how unreasonable it is, the acceptance of Grace as the way of God with you gives your thinking a reboot. Here are the four pillars of Grace that rework how you see things. 1. Expect some God-given good to come out of every situation. As the Apostle Paul reminds you, **"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."** (Romans 8:28 NIV) 2. See each person as a gift God has given you rather than a source of trouble or irritation. Remember what the Apostle Paul had to say about the people of the church at Philippi, which certainly was not perfect. **"I thank my God every time I remember you."** (Philippians 1:3 NIV) 3. Time is an entryway rather than an enemy. Solomon reminds us quite beautifully in talking about God's sense of time, **"He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end."** (Ecclesiastes 3:11 NIV) Time is how God brings you along into salvation and each step on the way takes you closer to perfect joy and peace. 4. Your abilities are "gifts" from God and part of what makes you a new creation. They are marvelous and God-given. **We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is**

prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. (Romans 12:6-8 NIV)