

2. Being a Channel for Grace

Grace + Holy Spirit = Power

In our last study, we focused on grace and observed the kindness of God, which extends even to His enemies. We found that, until a man receives God's forgiveness for sin, we are all enemies and that in our inner nature we are slaves to sin. I also pointed out that we are not sinners because we sin, but we sin because we are sinners. At the very root of our nature, we need the gift of life, and until we receive life from Jesus, we are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1 and 5) and separated from God. In this study, we continue to look at the topic of grace both in the New Testament and the Old Testament.

Our view of God is often clouded by our lack of knowledge of the Scriptures. In the Word of God, we see a God of all grace (1 Peter 5:10), revealed to us in the face of Jesus the Christ. At one point, Philip said to the Lord Jesus that all he wanted was to see the Father and that it would be enough:

"If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him." ⁸Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." ⁹Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? **He who has seen Me has seen the Father**; how can you say, 'Show us the Father?'" (John 14:7-9).

To look at the Lord Jesus was to see the Father. God is One, yet expressed in three persons. I don't completely understand it, and I don't have to. I have heard some people say that they prefer the God of the New Testament rather than the God of the Old Testament. However, this shows a lack of understanding. He is the same covenant-keeping God. He never changes; He's the same yesterday and today and forever. He is the Great I Am. I look at the Lord Jesus, and I see God in human form. When I look at the story of Christ with the woman caught in the act of adultery, I see grace personified. **"'Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?' 'She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more'" (John 8:10-11).**

The world is full of condemnatory voices, but in Jesus Christ, there is a voice of kindness and grace, someone who doesn't point to my sin, but lifts the burden from my shoulders and puts it on Himself. Everything that Satan does, Jesus has the power to undo. There is no sin too heavy for the Lord to lift off you. Where sin abounded, grace did so much more abound (Romans 5:20). No matter how far down the road of sin life has taken you; Christ is there, imploring you to seek His path to life.

Think of the hated chief tax collector, Zacchaeus. When Jesus walked by, He stopped and looked up at him in the tree and told him to come down so that Christ could come to his house and eat with him (Luke 19:5-9). Don't you think Zacchaeus had heard plenty of condemnatory voices all his working life? Think of his self-image. How wonderful for Jesus to reach out to him in the midst of his sinful life and want to stop by his house to enjoy his company. His sin was not a barrier to the Lord, but an opportunity for grace to be displayed. In response to Zacchaeus'

repentance, Jesus responded by saying, ¹⁰“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). That’s my God! The One who is victorious over sin and death! “But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Psalm 86:15).

What’s your favorite story of the grace and mercy of Jesus? Share.

How Far is God Willing to go to Forgive?

I have been pastoring people now for many years, and I occasionally come across individuals under a demonic deception—they think that they have crossed a border into committing a sin that cannot be forgiven. I don't have time today to get into it, but suffice it to say that most commentators and Bible teachers, including myself, believe that the only sin that cannot be forgiven is to resist the work of the Holy Spirit. i.e., the Spirit's work of pointing you to the finished work of Jesus on the cross so that you may be forgiven and cleansed (Mark 3:28–29).

Even after praying a prayer of repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus, the enemy of our souls does not give up, and often people experience a much greater battle in their thought life after becoming a Christian. Satan and his demons drop thoughts of guilt and shame at some sin in people’s lives and continue to remind in an accusatory way specific sins before an individual. Listen, if you are concerned that you have a sin in your past that is unforgivable, the very fact that you are worried about it proves that you have not committed the unpardonable sin. Those who have committed the unforgivable sin have no thought about it whatsoever. The only unforgivable sin is not seeking forgiveness. To deny and refuse the gift of God hardens a person’s heart. His conscience is seared and rendered insensitive in the same way the hide of an animal scarred with a branding iron becomes numb to further pain (1 Timothy 4:2).

If you have lingering thoughts about sin, take it to the Lord, ask His forgiveness for it, and receive His grace and mercy upon it. When the enemy brings it up again, tell him that Jesus has put it away and that, if he (Satan) is bringing issue with it, he is to take it up with Jesus. This is what Martin Luther, the great reformer of the faith, did. The devil sought to discourage [Luther], by making him feel guilty through rehearsing a list of his sins. When the devil had finished, Luther purportedly said, “Think harder: you must have forgotten some.” And the devil did think, and he listed more sins. When he was done enumerating the sins, Luther said, “Now, with a red pen write over that list, “The blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son cleanses us from all sin.” The devil had nothing to say.

In some cases, you might need to make some restitution, depending on the situation. What do I mean by that? Take a look at what Jesus said:

²³Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering (Matthew 5:23-24).

If you robbed a store in the past and now want a clean conscience before God, maybe you should go back to the store and make restitution of whatever you stole. When you come to a time of worship and remember that you have a friend that you treated badly and that person now has a problem with you, maybe you need to worship later and ask forgiveness of whomever you hurt and restore whatever you did to them. It's not always possible or even the wisest course of action in some situations, and each case needs a specific solution.

If the Holy Spirit continues to bring something to your remembrance, He will also show you what to do with it. Ask Him what you should do to restore your peace, and He will lead you. It is the Holy Spirit's ministry to teach us, and when we listen to Him and obey Him, our growth is accelerated. When we have a general feeling of unworthiness or guilt with no specific solution, it is often just the work of the enemy of our souls, seeking to keep us from coming to the throne of grace. God's voice is not one of condemnation, but of healing, and walks with us in the process.

Have you ever found yourself stuck in a situation until you learned a valuable lesson? Do you have a practical example of a time when you saw your need for a change of attitude to grow?

Also, try and think of a time your parents had to teach you a valuable lesson.

Spiritual Surgery

Sow righteousness for yourselves, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and **break up your unplowed ground**; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers his righteousness on you (Hosea 10:12).

The prophet Hosea was not talking about digging over your gardens. His focus is on the heart. Sometimes, the heart can get sluggish. The book of Hosea was written before Christ. Now, we are in a time when Christ *has* rained down mercy, grace, and righteousness. Hosea was talking about making our hearts ready to receive His Word, which can change us. The Word and the Spirit will bring us into maturity, but it does take our cooperation. That is why John tells the believers to "remain in the Vine" (John 15:5). Our hearts can get so hard through living in this sin-darkened world that the seed of the Word of God does not penetrate. The heart needs to be tilled over to get old roots out and to make the soil fertile again. When God sent John the Baptist ahead of Jesus to break up the ground for the Messiah, part of his message to the Israelites was to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8). The act of repentance, if it is genuine, will bring changes to a person's life. If the roots of our tree are put down into the things of this world, the ax of repentance needs to be brought to every root of bitterness and unforgiveness. "See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that **no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many**" (Hebrews 12:15).

John the Baptist, in his classic sermon on repentance, says that a spiritual ax must be brought to the tree of our life. A break must be made from old habits for the grace of God to flow in our lives. He went on to say, "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 3:10).

We are called not only to salvation in Christ but to be disciples and to be fruitful in Him. Jesus put it this way, ²⁹"If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell" (Matthew 5:29-30). Now, allow me to clarify, The Lord is not telling you to cut off your hand or gouge out your eye physically. He is saying that, once we are saved and filled with the Spirit, we are to be utterly radical in cutting away all sin from our lives, whatever it takes. If you have a problem with lust, cut off every possible way that sin can be expressed. Do you have a problem viewing pornography? Cut it out of your life!

There are things that you can do to break habits of sin. First, confess your sin to the Lord and ask for His help. What does confess mean? The Greek term means to say the same thing as God says concerning your sin. It has with it the thought of being transparent and sincere in digging up that root in your life. After confessing your sin to the Lord, make a plan, take some practical steps, and figure out a way you can do things differently to not to be tempted.

I have known people who have struggled with pornography, for instance. If you want to get free of sexual sin or addiction, there are steps you can take to get serious about your freedom from this sin and experience total recovery. For example, you can set up a program on your computer that will send a message to a close friend whenever you visit a Website with questionable content (<http://x3watch.com>). You can build accountability into your life.

When we are talking about living a righteous life, it is primarily about obeying Christ. We look to His finished work, and we are counted righteous, but our salvation is not the only thing at stake. God wants to use us in this world, and for that to happen, we need to be effective. We want to go beyond just knowing that our sins are forgiven, for He has called us His friends. To be His friends means that He wants us to walk with Him, to know His heart. His interests are our interests. He causes us to will and to do His good pleasure. In this process, He is changing us.

However, we don't need to be perfect to be used by God. He teaches us as we go and walk with Him. It is "on-the-job" training.

We are already cleansed by what Christ has done. Our effectiveness, however, can be limited when we listen to and agree with the enemy of our souls instead of listening to and obeying our Lord. The enemy's voice is loud in the culture in which we live. We need to be careful as to what we choose to listen to, to believe, and what rules our minds, for we will act accordingly. Proverbs 23:7 say that as a man thinks in his heart, so is he. This Scripture means that whoever controls your thought life, controls you. What do you spend your time thinking?

Sit down and count the cost. How much do you want the Holy Spirit and the grace of God to flow in you and through you? To that degree will be the level of the Spirit's operation in your life. When the grace and mercy of God come to a person, i.e., when we see what it cost the Lord to buy your freedom from sin, the result of that repentance will be a complete about-face in your life. It will also bring a desire to do whatever it takes to get things right between you and God and with people.

All Sin Can Be Cleansed and Forgiven

No sin is so bad that it cannot be forgiven. For instance, have you ever read about the worst king in the Bible? His name was Manasseh. He was so entirely given over to a sinister agenda that he became the evilest of all the kings of Israel and Judah. Let's read together of how he set himself against the God of Israel and what he did:

¹Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. ²He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. ³He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had demolished; he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. ⁴He built altars in the temple of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, "My Name will remain in Jerusalem forever." ⁵In both courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. ⁶He sacrificed his children in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced divination and witchcraft, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger. ⁷He took the image he had made and put it in God's temple, of which God had said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever." ⁸I will not again make the feet of the Israelites leave the land I assigned to your ancestors, if only they will be careful to do everything I commanded them concerning all the laws, decrees and regulations given through Moses." ⁹But Manasseh led Judah and the people of Jerusalem astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites.

¹⁰The Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. ¹¹So the Lord brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. ¹²In his distress he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. ¹³And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God. ¹⁴Afterward he rebuilt the outer wall of the City of David, west of the Gihon spring in the valley, as far as the entrance of the Fish Gate and encircling the hill of Ophel; he also made it much higher. He stationed military commanders in all the fortified cities in Judah. ¹⁵He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the Lord, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. ¹⁶Then he restored the altar of the Lord and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel. ¹⁷The people, however, continued to sacrifice at the high places, but only to the Lord their God (2 Chronicles 33:1-17).

What do you consider the worst of this man's sins? What did God do to turn him around? What strikes you as to how he found mercy and grace? What fruits came forth as a result of his turning around?

Like God did to Manasseh, sometimes the Lord takes one into a painful situation to show us ourselves. When in pain, one of the most foolish things to do is to plead not guilty. Look at the depths of sin with which this man was weighed down and his flagrant disregard for the covenant into which Israel had entered. The very place where God had placed His name was the place Manasseh set up his false gods, making altars for sacrifices to them, not only in the courts of the temple but inside the very temple of God as well (v. 7). Today, we, too, are assaulted daily with images placed in the temple of our hearts by the device we call the television. Be careful of the pictures that are daily set up in the temple of your heart. Be self-aware of your thoughts and feelings when you watch TV. Recognize that it can be a tool of the enemy depending on what you view. I am not against watching T.V. at all, but you must guard your heart. **Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it (Proverbs 4:23).** If you find lustful desires rising in you because of something that you are seeing or if fear wells up within you at a horror movie, know that it is an investment that the enemy is making in you, a seed is sown in the ground of your heart. My experience of the enemy is that he will always come and seek payment from you for what he has invested or sown in you.

Verse nine says that Manasseh led the city of Jerusalem and the nation astray by how he led his life. As the king, he was an influencer. What he did, they did. He disregarded the faith of his father, Hezekiah, and followed what his grandfather Ahaz did. He sacrificed his children in the fire of Molech in the valley of Hinnom, just south of Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 28:3). Molech was a stone idol with its hands outstretched and put together. Underneath the idol's hands a fire was started, and when the hands of the idol glowed red hot, the children were placed in the hands as human sacrifices. Imagine the screams of the children reaching up to God. No wonder that God intervened and brought the nation of Babylon to attack and disperse the people away from their land for seventy years. Even though Manasseh repented, the people went back to their high places. God cannot stomach the sacrifice of innocent children. Judgment was delayed for a short while because of Manasseh's repentance, but God visited this sin upon the nation.

The sins of some are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them (1 Timothy 5:24).

This man, Manasseh, in the midst of his pain repented greatly (v.12). We are not told what he did to humble himself greatly, but whatever he did, he accompanied it with a heartfelt plea toward the Lord (verses 12-13), and because of that, the Lord was moved with his appeal and surprised Manasseh by restoring him to his kingdom. Then, he knew that the Lord was God! How? He knew by the Lord answering heartfelt prayer. This kindness by God is grace! The King of Heaven was stooping to hear a penitent sinner and giving him mercy and forgiveness instead of judgment. Considering the things that this man had done, God was rich in mercy toward Manasseh. And this is before we see the grace of God revealed in Christ Jesus! We often think of the God of the Old Testament as a God of judgment, but here we see great mercy. Thank God that He still listens to those caught in their sin. When He hears their cry for mercy, He is quick to respond and turn their lives around, no matter how bad their sin. The fruit of repentance was to clear out all the false gods and images that he had set up in Jerusalem, restore the altar of sacrifice to its rightful place before the Temple of God, and the command to worship only the Lord.

It is incredible to consider the grace God showed to Manasseh. He spent much of his life in the most grievous sin we can imagine, and yet even before Christ came in the flesh to pay for sin, we see the grace of God meeting Manasseh when he repented and turned to the Lord. Similarly, the thief on the cross was forgiven, though he had lived a sin-filled life. The repentant thief looked to Christ and, at the very end, was forgiven. This type of grace is hard to comprehend. We like to think of God as being just and fair. The problem with that is our idea of fairness and justice is viewed from our perspective. We want justice when we are wronged and mercy when we find ourselves in the wrong. God's justice and mercy were reconciled in Christ Jesus. He is the measure of righteousness, and He is the provider of the righteousness of those who believe in Him.

If we want to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and live a fruitful life, empowered by His Spirit, we will continually need to come before God's throne of grace to find help in our time of need from the Father (Hebrews 4:16). Grace is not just what we receive when we trust Christ for our salvation; it is available for us at all times. Our Christian life begins with grace, and to live the Christian life, we must continue in grace. We need the grace of God to overcome the world, self (the flesh), and Satan. We are called to be more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Romans 8:37). James writes: **"But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble'" (James 4:6).** Grace isn't just a one-time thing; it is a constant outpouring from the throne of grace—a never-ending river of mercy and grace—if you are humble enough to receive the grace of God. The best receivers are those broken and humble enough to allow the Spirit of all grace to flow through them. **"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).**

When my wife and I travel, we always make use of the moving walkways at the airport. It is such a relief when you are weary of traveling and tired of hauling your bags, to step onto that moving walkway. My wife always says; "I wish life were more like this." I would compare living your Christian life in this way. Living the Christian life with an understanding of the grace of God is like stepping on that moving walkway. You get to rest and put your baggage down. We do not need to carry the burden of sin or to live with any guilt. God wants to take your baggage from you. When you understand that your sin is like baggage, slowing you down, you will want to leave it.

John Metcalfe once said; "Nothing will make you want to give up sinning more than knowing that Christ has taken and remitted all your sin, past, present and future."

"Now hang on a minute," I hear you say, "If God has already paid for all of our sins, for the sin of the entire world, why do I need to stop sinning? Why should I try to live my life as God wants me to when I know that He already accepts me as I am?" The apostle Paul understood this reasoning well, for he was moved to write these words to answer this exact question: **"What shall we say then? Shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace? (Romans 6:1).** Paul answers this question and says, **"By no means!"** Then, to further refute this question, he states; **"We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"**

Paul reasons that no Christian resurrected to new life should be pining for the grave. Sin has the stench of death about it. Why would anyone choose it? God's grace sets us free from the law of sin and death. Can the good news be that good? How can God give grace to those who do not deserve it? His grace seems too good to be true! Consider what Martin Lloyd Jones wrote about the grace of God:

There is thus clearly a sense in which the message of "justification by faith only" can be dangerous, and likewise with the news that salvation is entirely of grace... I would say to all preachers: If your preaching of salvation has not been misunderstood in that way, then you had better examine your sermons again, and you had better make sure that you really are preaching the salvation that is offered in the New Testament to the ungodly, to the sinner, to those who are enemies of God. There is this kind of dangerous element about the true presentation of the doctrine of salvation.¹

To summarize, let me make two points. One, without an understanding of the nature of sin and our true dilemma, we will not understand our need for God's grace or the necessity of true repentance.

Secondly, when we understand God's grace and what has been accomplished for us in Christ Jesus, this will change everything. Our view of ourselves, our identity, will enable us to come boldly to His throne of grace. This will impact how we live as empowered followers of Christ. What joy we can experience in this life when we are convinced that our God is for us!

I want to end with an illustration. I have heard a story of a man who bought a ticket on a cruise ship. He only had just enough money for his ticket, so he reasoned that he should pack his own food for the journey. He packed a bag full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. On the cruise, he noticed the other passengers were enjoying sumptuous fare and were enjoying room service. He finally inquired with one of the other passengers and asked how much the dinner would cost. Imagine his surprise when he found out that all of the meals and room service were included in the price of his ticket when he had existed on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on his journey! You may rest assured that, once he understood what was included in the price of his ticket, he made sure that he was there for every meal provided.

We are all bound for a destination. Grace is not only the means to get us to our goal, but it is for us to live by on this entire journey. We start this life by grace, we continue by His grace, and we will need to carry on by His grace until His glory changes us.

Prayer: Father, please open our eyes to understand that You are for us. You have taken the law that condemned us and nailed it to Your cross. We thank You for Your marvelous grace. Help us to live in the good of all that You have done for us and to show Your mercy to others. Amen.

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¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Quoted in Stephen Brown, *When Being Good Isn't Good Enough*. Nashville: Nelson, 1990, p.102.

