

1. Grace Changes us

Grace + Holy Spirit = Power

Warm-up Question: Have you ever met someone whose character inspired you so much that you wanted to be like him or her? What was it about their character that impressed you?

Mohammed Kamel was born into a prominent Islamic family in Egypt. His father was a businessman, and his mother was a lawyer. He grew up in a Muslim household and, from an early age, was a devout follower of Islam. When he was six –years old, he began memorizing verses from the Qur’an. Mohammed attended the mosque with his father every Friday, and after prayer time, they were taught to curse the enemies of Islam. As a young man, he grew up with the false assumption that all Americans were Christians. He equated the culture and way of life he witnessed in television programs and films from America to be normal Christian behavior. This belief colored his understanding and his view of the Western world in general and of the church.

He was convinced that Christians typically indulged in wild and sordid behavior. He had false assumptions about the Christian faith. For example, he thought that Christians believed in three gods. Mohammed was severe in his opposition to Christianity, believing Islam to be the one correct way to God. One day he decided that he would go to a church in the capital city, Cairo, and watch the Christians get drunk on their communion wine, thinking that he would witness all types of lewd acts. He reasoned that he would have a lot of good stories to tell his friends. □

Mohammed asked his friend, Mamdouh, to take him to a Christian church service. Mamdouh was suspicious of his intentions, knowing that he was an enemy of the Christian faith. He didn't want Mohammed to disturb or ridicule his church, so he took him to another church of a different affiliation. During the service, the pastor asked the congregation to join him in prayer. Mahmoud told him to close his eyes and listen to the prayer. This was the point where Mohammed thought that sin would start to take place, so while everyone's eyes were closed in prayer, he was looking around, but saw no scandalous behavior. Disappointed, he reasoned that his friend had warned the others ahead of time. □

He was determined to prepare correctly for the next church meeting by learning a Christian prayer. In that way, he could come unannounced and act like a Christian. After the service, as he walked back to his friend's house, he asked Mamdouh to write out a Christian prayer that he could memorize. Mamdouh wrote out the words of the Lord's Prayer found in Matthew 6:9-13. I will quote from Mohammed's own words what happened when he went into Mahmoud's spare room to rest and read the prayer:

I sat on the bed to read over and then memorize the prayer. The first two words, “Our Father,” grabbed me! “Our Father? Our *daddy*?” I asked myself incredulously, wondering whether I could have read correctly. Muslims would never dare to address God in this way! As a Muslim, I was taught that Allah was my master, a frightful and distant overseer who would never allow me to approach him in such a familiar way. How disrespectful and foolish for Christians to address God like this. Surely this was blasphemy! □

Shaking my head, I casually opened the window, gazed out, and addressed the night sky in a mocking whisper: “God, did you marry my mother? Are you my father?” Suddenly, an inexplicable and overwhelming Presence filled the room. It was a powerful, yet comforting, Presence that penetrated me to the very core of my soul. The response to my question was almost audible: “*Yes, I AM your Father.*” I was suffused entirely [to gradually spread over and be overwhelmed] by God's Presence, enveloped by an indescribable Love. This was God's love *for me, a fatherly love, the love of a daddy!* God was introducing Himself at that moment, saying that He was my heavenly Father!

I felt like a little child who, having been estranged from his daddy for twenty-three years, had at long last been found. The love I felt was so overpowering that I wanted to proclaim it to the rooftops: God is my *Father!* God, the Creator of all, the All-Powerful, the Lord of Lords—is my *Father!*”

All through the night, I experienced the sensation of God’s love hugging me, and I was desperately hugging Him back. I began to be mindful of all the wrong things I had done and of how they grieved the Father. Every wrong I could recall ever having committed, I confessed to Him. I also expressed my remorse at having entered the church under false pretenses so that I could make fun of the Christians.

Becoming aware of my sins and how they grieved the Father convulsed me in gut-wrenching sobs. I cried so hard that Mamdouh heard me from the adjoining room. When he later asked why I had been crying so loudly, he couldn’t believe that the Lord’s Prayer had so profoundly affected me.

That night I slept very deeply. When I awoke the next morning, I felt as though I had shed the weight of a heavy camel that had been riding on my shoulders. Peace and comfort filled my heart. I learned later that this is what the Bible means when it says, “**Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed**” (John 8:36).¹

Mohammad Kamel, who had been an enemy of the Christian faith, changed his name to Daniel Abdul Massieh (Daniel the servant of Messiah), and now preaches the gospel of Christ in many different countries including all over the Middle East Arabic nations as well as in the USA. I met Daniel at a conference last year when he spoke about reaching people in the Middle East. He has suffered torture and imprisonment at the hands of Muslim extremists for turning to Christ from his Muslim faith. Except for his family contacts, he could very well have been killed for being a traitor to Islam.

We marvel at God’s grace toward one of His enemies, but we do not have to look far in Scripture to find others who were once enemies of God and who were confronted by Christ and received grace and mercy. Paul, the apostle, was one such man who thought it service to God to violently persecute Christians. □

¹²I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, ¹³even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. **Yet I was shown mercy** because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; ¹⁴and **the grace of our Lord was more than abundant**, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 1:12-14).

¹ Daniel Massieh, *Traitor*. Published by Open the Gates Publishing, San Diego, CA 92198. Page 31-33. Website: www.openthegates.org

Are human beings basically good or fundamentally evil? If you believe that both reside in the human heart, how are people to know if they are good or evil? Do you think that God has a dividing line?□

Human depravity

In talking about the topic of grace, we will do an extreme disservice to the revelation of God's grace if we do not bring up the doctrine of the complete and universal depravity of man. The truth of the matter is that all of us are enemies of God until we have been born-again of the Spirit and the weight of our sin is lifted from us:□

For if, while **we were God's enemies**, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (Romans 5:10)

Once you were alienated from God and **were enemies** in your minds because of your evil behavior (Colossians 1:21).

Until we come to Christ to receive the gift of Life, at the very inner core of our lives, we are alienated from God. We are His enemies, needing to be made clean before a Holy God. Like Mohammed Kamel, until we come to Christ, there is an opposing spirit at work within us, causing us to rebel against our Creator. Paul, the apostle, talks about, "**the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience**" (Ephesians 2:2). As much as we try to be good and acceptable, we cannot change our inner nature through self-effort or self-reformation. The problem is much deeper and lies at the core of our nature. "**Can an Ethiopian change his skin or a leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil**" (Jeremiah 13:23). We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. The Word of God tells us, "**The hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts** throughout their lives" (Ecclesiastes 9:3). The prophet Jeremiah puts it this way, ⁹"The heart is more deceitful than all else and is **desperately sick**; who can understand it? ¹⁰I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds" (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

Man is totally depraved, which is a word meaning morally corrupt and wicked. We are not "utterly depraved" to the point of being as wicked as one could be, but there is no part of our being that is left untouched by sin. We speak sinful words, our actions are sinful, and our thoughts and bodies suffer from the power of sin at work in our lives. We make excuses for ourselves, we say, "he's only human," but we were created for more than this. □

This body of sin is not how God originally made us. You may have even heard people say, "But he's got a good heart." Actually, that is Humanism. Humanism sees sin at the outer edge of our lives and considers human beings as being basically good. To whom should we listen? When I have a problem with my computer, I go to seek help at the nearest store of the company that made it. I do this because they are experts. They are experts because they are the ones that put my computer together. Likewise, when seeking to fix the problem with the human species, we

should go to the One who made us and knows us. We need to listen to what He says. We need to understand our sin problem as a sickness for which God has provided a cure. According to the Word of God, this is God's testimony of our human condition:

¹⁰As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. ¹²All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." ¹³"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." ¹⁴"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." ¹⁵"Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ruin and misery mark their ways, ¹⁷and the way of peace they do not know." ¹⁸"There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Romans 3:10-18).

We try to make ourselves feel better about our condition by trying to do good works, but trying to come before the King of Kings with our good works is an insult to Him. "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and **all our righteous acts are like filthy rags**; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away" (Isaiah 64:6). If our righteous kind acts are as filthy rags to God, what are our sinful acts like? Who would see the Queen, President or Prime Minister of your country dressed in painting clothes or clothes that are threadbare and had holes? No, we need to be covered in the provision of the clothing that the King of Kings has given us, i.e., His righteousness. □

What makes our condition worse is the fact that we cannot get out of our situation by anything we can do. We are helpless. We are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1); we are "sold under sin" (Romans 7:14); we are in "captivity to the law of sin" (Romans 7:23); and "by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). The work of the Holy Spirit is to draw us to the Lord Jesus by the conviction of sin and making us aware of our need of a Savior. How does He do this? He works in our daily situation to convince us that we have fallen short of God's standard of righteousness. It is the Spirit of God that points out to us our fallen nature, i.e., the problem of our sin. Our trouble is that we often ignore the thoughts within. If you ever want to get to heaven, no outward reform or good actions on your part will be sufficient to earn God's favor when time is at an end, and we stand before God on judgment day (Revelation 20:11-12). □

Heaven is impossible in our sinful condition, so where do we go from here? □

²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁶They were even more astonished and said to Him, "**Then who can be saved?**" ²⁷**Looking at them, Jesus said, "With people it is impossible,** but not with God; for all things are possible with God (Mark 10:25-27).

I have heard various interpretations of what Jesus means here by talking about a camel going through the eye of a needle. Some have compared it to a small door at the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, Israel. In those days, entry into the city was small, for matters of security. Camels were often heavily laden with all kinds of merchandise, which had to be unloaded to get into a small city gate called the eye of the needle gate. In this interpretation, a rich man is similar to a merchant having to take off his load of merchandise and belongings from the camel's back to enter through the narrow way into the gates of the city. This analogy, which speaks to the

“merchandise” in our lives, i.e., the things on which we use and rely, but which sometimes bogs us down and prohibits us from entering. The second interpretation is the one I favor, i.e., being that the main point that Jesus was making is clear and simple: whether you are a rich man or a poor man, it is impossible to thread a camel through a needle. In the same way, it is impossible to enter heaven by our works, no matter how religious or how respected we are. We all come the same way into the kingdom of God. □

In chapter 5 of the book of Matthew, Jesus taught what is known today as the Sermon on the Mount, or the Beatitudes. It is one of the most “quotable” passages in the whole of the Bible. Jesus makes a statement, which I would like you to consider. He says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Do you see a direct connection between this statement and the grace of God? What are we to receive if we are poor in spirit and what does this include?

The truth is that we are all poor in spirit. Some of us know this, and some are unaware. It is only those who are aware of their need that is open to receive His grace, and in receiving His grace, they receive the kingdom! That is why Jesus said in Matthew 19:14, “**Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.**”

Here is where Satan thought that he had won the battle for the domination of the race and the planet. Having tempted man in the Garden of Eden, our entire race became servants to sin and Satan. It was impossible, he thought, for a man to enter heaven. Justice demanded that the soul who sins shall die (Ezekiel 18:4). God had said so in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:17). If it is true, and I put it to you that it is, that man is desperately wicked and depraved at the core of his being; then it is only logical for it to be impossible for us to enter into heaven as we are. No amount of reform will ever make us clean before a holy God. As we have already said, can the leopard change his outward form, his spots? No, if we change our outward form and try to reform ourselves but leave our heart unchanged, it is just an external deception. □

He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration [rebirth] and renewal of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).

God’s way is for us to be regenerated. The word in Greek is *paliggenesia*. It is composed of two Greek words put together *palin* and *genesis*. The root of *palin* is “pale,” which is the word for again or repetition or renew. Genesis is the word for origin, birth, or genealogy. What Titus is saying in the above passage is that there is a provision of God, outside of our works, whereby we are washed of our sins by a rebirth otherwise known as being born-again. We have to have a new nature if we are to enter heaven. Heaven is a perfect place and would be imperfect if we were to enter without being regenerated by the Spirit of God. This is what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:3, “**Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**”

The God Who Graciously Stoops

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, **full of grace** and truth (John 1:14).

The Great Creator God, who made all things, is a God of grace. It was His plan from the very beginning of the ages to bring forth a bride for His Son, the Lord Jesus. This bride is composed of all who are born-again of the Spirit, who bow the knee to receive God's gift of complete pardon for rebellion and a life of sin. When one considers our rebellious and sinful nature and our corrupt hearts before God, this is wonderful grace.

To understand the full meaning of grace, we need to turn to its usage in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word *Chen* means "to bend or stoop." It has the idea of "condescending favor," the kind of favor that a King has for one of his people.

Queen Victoria of England, when she was a girl and had just become queen, was asked to sign a death warrant for a person who, by court-martial, had been condemned to death. It is said that she said to the Duke who brought her the warrant, "Cannot you find any reason why this man should be pardoned?" The Duke said, "No, it was a very great offense; he ought to be punished." "But was he a good soldier?" The Duke said he was a shamefully bad soldier and had always been noted as a bad soldier. "Well, cannot you invent for me any reason?" "Well," he said, "I have every reason to believe from testimony that he was a good man, although a bad soldier." "That will do," she said, and she wrote across the warrant, "pardoned"—not because the man deserved it—but because she *wanted* a reason for having mercy.²

God has stooped down to you and me in grace and mercy bestowing His wonderful favor upon us, writing across our warrant, "pardoned." This He did not do grudgingly, but lavishly and joyfully. It was what He purposed in His heart to do! That which we couldn't do, that which was impossible for us, He has accomplished in Christ. This is self-sacrificing love, agape love. Justice demanded that the soul that sins must die, but God in His love for us came in the person of His Son, Jesus, to take our place, to die our death instead of us, to taste death for every man. "Jesus...by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone" (Hebrews 2:9).

How do we know if we are Born-again?

If there is only one way to get to heaven, i.e., by the cross of Christ alone, how do we know if we have received Him and His gracious provision? What is the evidence that the Spirit has regenerated your life? Almost all cups in our kitchens have the stamp of who made it on the bottom. Do you bear the mark of the cross in your life? This kind of life is the stamp of ownership by God. □

Are you struggling to live the Christian life in your own strength and confused as to why you cannot seem to change your habits? Are you still trying to be good enough? Are you fearful or uncertain about your eternal destiny? Or is your soul at rest in the finished work that Christ completed in His death for you on the cross? "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1). If you are not sure, then today, right where you are at, receive the gift of

² Charles Spurgeon, *Human Depravity and Divine Mercy*, <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols10-12/chs615.pdf>

God. "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (John 4:10).

Sincerely ask Him to come into your life and forgive you of your sin, and you shall become a child of God: ¹²"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

The truth is that the gift of life is available for all those who ask for this "living water" of which Jesus spoke. What do you think holds some people back from asking for this living water?

What would you tell a person who says that he is not good enough to receive the grace of God? What examples could you give a person to help him to understand God's grace?

Humanity has invented all types of pathways to enlightenment, i.e., ways to know God. Why is it so hard for some to receive God's gift of grace? Is it because we have a desire to be in control? We want to know that it is possible for us to save ourselves, to somehow try to earn our way, and in so doing we think we are retaining our freedom. This thinking stems from fear. It is hard for us to believe that God truly loves us and that He wants us to know true freedom and real life, which is found in Him. □

Allow me to say something significant and let it sink into your soul: there is not one thing that you could do to make God love you more, and there is not one thing that you could do that could make Him love you less. Read that again and let it sink in. Paul, before he was converted, was a murderer. Worse than that, he murdered Christians and thought He was doing God a favor. Do you believe that offended the Holy Spirit? I cannot think of anything worse. Yet, while he was self-righteous, and persecuting God's saints, God the Father had mercy and extended grace to him while he was a murderer. He did not wait for Paul to clean himself up or even have a change of heart. God gave him a new heart! Don't think that there is anything too terrible for God to look at or to forgive. Don't think for a moment that there is any sin that could hold you back from experiencing the grace of God. Let His grace break through to you, wherever you are, being aware of His favor upon you right now! □

Prayer: Father, I come to you today, knowing that I am in need. I need you to save me as I cannot save myself. I know that your destiny for me cannot be achieved unless I come to You, open-handed, and receive Your gift, the gift of Your perfect life. I am overwhelmed at such an exchange of death for life. I accept Your terms, Lord. Nothing in my hands I bring. I cling to You as my refuge and the Savior of my life. I thank You that you came not only to save and restore me but to share with me Your glory. I thank You that You have called me to be more than a servant, more than a subject in Your kingdom, but rather a son, a daughter, one of Your precious ones enabled to live for You and reign with You. Forgive all my sin, and make me new. I want to be born-again by Your Spirit. Amen.

My plan for this series of teaching is to explore our need for grace, but also to explore the vast riches and depth of His grace so that it impacts our lives. The Scriptures tell us that the Word of God is powerful, so powerful that it is spirit and life to us. Faith comes by hearing, and we are going to focus on and give our attention to what His Word says about the beautiful gift of the Spirit and the Word of God given to us. When we understand God's grace, it will raise our faith

level, our expectation. What we expect out of life has a great deal to do with what we experience in life. If you believe God has more for you than what you have been experiencing, then let's see where God will take us in these next few studies as we focus on His grace and His power. We will also be looking at how His power is lived out through us as we realize our identity in Him.

Let's close with the speaking out or the bestowing of a blessing on us:

My prayer is "That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:17-19).

Keith Thomas

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com