

Where's the Grace?

Luke 6:32-36

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Did I ever tell you what Claire Brodeur gave me for Christmas?

She gave me a plaque. Well, it's more than a plaque. It's an engraved piece of marble, beautifully cut and polished. And do you know what it says? It says, "Jesus loves you... but I'm his favorite."

She doesn't really believe that... or, at least, I don't think she does. Jesus loves everyone *equally*. That's what makes it funny — to think of Jesus having favorites.

But it's not hard for us to convince ourselves that we're his favorites, is it?

Most of you know that I was raised in the Southern Baptist tradition, and in that tradition I was raised to understand that there was a world of difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. Whether it was formally taught to me or I picked it up by osmosis, the theology I was raised with said that:

- The God of the Old Testament instituted the law to try and address the sinfulness of humankind, but when that didn't work, the God of the New Testament instituted grace.
- The God of the Old Testament created a merit-based system to try and earn salvation, but when that didn't work the God of the New Testament offered salvation as a generous gift.
- Therefore, the laws of the Old Testament led to legalism and works-based righteousness, while the gift of grace given to us in the New Testament led to freedom from the law. The Old Testament was about *acting* righteous, while the New Testament was concerned with *being made* righteous.

And in my own mind as a child, the end result of that process of thought, then, was that people of the Jewish faith were stuck in a cycle of legalism, and, sure God loved them, BUT now Christians were God's favorites.

That's because, we Christians are New Testament people, people of grace and freedom, who believe that salvation is a gift that cannot be earned. We aren't legalistic. The Pharisees are legalistic. But not us Christians.

But when we come across the teachings of Jesus, what we find over and over isn't freedom from the expectation of living and acting righteously, but instead he places an even heavier expectation on us than the law ever did.

Love your friends? No. "Love your *enemies*." Do good to those who do good to you? No. "Do good to those who *hate* you." Bless those who bless you? No. "Bless those who curse you."

Do you see what I mean? Jesus doesn't let us settle for the bare minimum of the law. He raises the bar, not lowers it. He expects more than the Old Testament, not less. Is this freedom from slavery to the law or an even heavier bondage than before? Where's the freedom, Jesus? Where's the grace, Jesus?

I've been a Christian a long time now. It my surprise to hear that I've devoted most of my life to being a Christian. I went to camps and retreats as a youth. I took classes on how to share my faith. In college I went on three mission trips a year and even led praise and worship for my Baptist campus. I went to school to become a professional Christian – and you hired me.

Do you want to know how good I am at loving my enemies? Or turning the other cheek? The answer is: not very good.

Why does Jesus place such a heavy burden on us?

He says, "Look. What good is it to love only those who love you? Even sinners do that. What good is it to do good to only those who do good to you? Even sinners do that. You're not a sinner, are you? Now, you have to act right. You can't just keep on acting like those sinners. There's a higher list of demands for you. You have to do more, not less now that you're a Christian."

In essence, he says, what's the difference between us and everyone else if we only love in the same ways that everyone else loves.

He has a point. Most of us aren't even that good at loving the people we love the most.

Last Sunday, I was at Safeway buying snacks for the Super Bowl, and as I walked out, I looked over at the self-checkout line and saw a gaggle of 40- to 60-something year old men who had raided the Valentine's Day section of the store. They stood in line at the checkout holding heart-shaped boxes of chocolates and pre-packaged red roses wrapped in clear plastic and big, pink cards with the word "love" emblazoned across the top.

And I thought to myself as I walked by them how cheap and superficial and shallow that expression of love seemed to me. They couldn't even be bothered to hand write a love letter to their valentine or go to real florist. No, they bought pre-packaged love, conveniently placed right be the doors. Didn't even have to hunt through the store for them. (Can you hear the self-righteous indignation in my tone?)

Then on Monday night – Valentine's night – do you know what I brought home to my high school sweetheart, my soulmate, my best friend and wife of nearly 20 years? A

leftover cupcake from our Executive Council meeting... that I transported home in a disposable coffee cup. How romantic, right? Thank God for DeeDee Dockum and those cupcakes she sent with James, or I would have walked in the door empty-handed. I didn't even go out of my way to buy a cheap heart-shaped box of chocolates.

Sometimes we don't even do a good job of loving those who love us. So it's nothing to balk at when Jesus raises the bar higher for his followers:

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much again" (Luke 6:32-34).

I don't know about you, but my problem isn't a lack of trying, but a lack of succeeding.

Did you know that one of the most regularly recurring words for "sin" in the Old Testament is tied to the practice of archery and simply means "falling short?" It does not mean intentionally trying to do the wrong thing or acting out of malice or evil, but carries the image of an archer taking aim at the target, with the full intent of hitting the bull's eye, but the arrow "falling short" and missing the target.

It seems to me that so often our sinfulness is like that. We intend to do the right thing. We set our sights on the goal — we *will* love even those who don't love us, we *will* do good even for those who don't do good to us, we *will* lend without expecting anything in return — and yet, we fall short.

There's a *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip from years ago. Calvin and Hobbes are working on a snow sculpture entitled "The Spirit of Compromise." Each of them is building a snowman and having them reach across the "dividing line" to shake hands.

Calvin exults, "This will be inspirational. People will weep to see two snowmen overcoming their differences and cooperating."

Hobbes says, "Make your snowman's arm longer. His hand won't reach my snowman's hand."

Calvin replies, "Why should I make a new arm? Just make yours longer."

Hobbes counters, "Then it will look like my snowman had to reach farther than yours did. They should be equal."

"Then build your snowman closer."

"I'm not going to start all over. Just make your arm longer."

"I refuse. You can't tell me what to do."

"In that case, my snowman refuses to shake hands with your snowman."

"So what!" My snowman won't even talk to yours. I'm turning his head the other way."

"While he's looking over there, my snowman will kick your snowman in his big, white rear end."

"Oh, yeah, well mine knocks your snowman's head off."

"Fine, my snowman feeds your snowman his own nose."

They tear into each other and before you know it, they're both splayed out on the ground and in the fight have destroyed both snowman. From his back, Hobbes says, "I don't think this sculpture is very good." Calvin replies, "It's a compromise..."

So often we start out with good, well-meaning intentions of following the teachings of Jesus, but before long we realize how hard they are and we decide to compromise.

And why wouldn't we? Can we really live into the ethic he set for us? Love our enemies? Do good to those who hate us? Who is capable of that? I know I'm not. Try as I might, I keep falling short.

But where I fall short, God does not.

The people who have attended here through the years know that every once in a while I throw out a Greek word to remind them that I know more than they do. The New Testament was written in Greek and in the the question repeated three times by Jesus, "what credit is that to you?" the word translated as "credit" is the word which everywhere else is translated "grace."

What *grace* is that? Grace. Not credit — as if you were earning golden stars on a the good behavior chart. *Grace*. It ought to read:

"If you love those who love you, where's the *grace*? If you do good to those who do good to you, where's the *grace*? If you lend to those who lend to you, where's the *grace*? There is no grace."

This is Jesus' point. This is the principle: we are to be gracious as God is gracious. The final work of grace in anyone's life is to make a person gracious. God is kind to the ungrateful and to the wicked. Be gracious like your Father is gracious.

This past week, I read a story in the news about a Catholic Priest in Arizona. Maybe you read it, too. The story goes like this: for several decades the Priest, Rev. Andres Arango, who had served a local parish — preaching and teaching scripture, performing the

sacraments, ministering to the ill and lonely, caring for those in need — resigned after he was found to have performed baptisms incorrectly throughout his career, rendering the rite invalid for thousands of people in the Diocese's eyes.

What did he do so wrong, so incorrectly that his baptisms have been ruled invalid and he felt inclined to resign his post?

He used one wrong word.

During baptisms in both English and Spanish, Arango used the phrase “*we* baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” He should have said, “*I* baptize...” the diocese explained.

“It's not the community that baptizes a person and incorporates them into the Church of Christ; rather, it is Christ, and Christ alone, who presides at all sacraments; therefore it is Christ who baptizes,” it said. In Roman Catholic polity the priest stands in Christ's stead, and so Father Arango, should have said *I* and not *we*.

Thus the diocese has declared: “If you were baptized using the wrong words, that means your baptism is invalid, and you are not baptized” (Rachel Treisman, “An Arizona priest used one wrong word in baptisms for decades. They're all invalid,” *NPR*, Feb. 15, 2022).

But we Christians aren't legalistic, are we? Let me ask you, where's the grace?

Never mind commitment to Christ that can surely be evidenced in the lives of those baptized... and never mind the years of faithful ministry and service on the part of Father Arango, one wrong word has invalidated all of their baptisms and his entire ministry. Where's the grace?

Our God is bigger than one wrong word.

We're so quick to say that the God of the Old Testament is a God of vengeance and anger and punishment and judgment. But maybe those interpretations say a whole lot more about us than they do about God. For example, what part of the story of Jacob screams somebody getting from God what they deserve?

Remember the story of Jacob's theophany, his dream of angels on a stairway to heaven? Here's a man who had just deceived his father and cheated his brother out of his inheritance. But God's response to finding Jacob vulnerable, sleeping all alone in open country, is not to strike him down for his sins but to give him a blessing.

Jacob wakes from the dream in awe, exclaiming, “Surely the Lord is in this place — and I did not know it!” He took the stone that had been his pillow and he laid it down to create an altar and he worshipped God there. How did he know it was God? Because he got exactly what he did not deserve. He got *grace*.

“If you love those who love you, where’s the grace? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, where’s the grace? Even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive as much, where’s the grace? Even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return... and you will be children of the Most High” (Luke 6:32-35).

It makes no sense and does no good for us to wallow around in the grace of God like it’s a warm bath drawn just for us, made to make us and us alone feel good. We are to do more than simply receive grace. We are to become its vessels. That’s what Jesus is calling us to – to be to others as God is to us: *gracious*.

Kathleen Norris tells the story of an experience she and others shared at a busy airport one morning. She says:

“I noticed a young couple with an infant at an airport departure gate. The baby was staring intently at other people, and as soon as he recognized a human face, no matter whose it was, no matter if it was young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or worried-looking he would respond with absolute delight.

It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven. And as I watched that baby play with any adult who would allow it, I felt as awe-struck as Jacob, because I realized that this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted” (*Amazing Grace*, 150-151).

What Jesus asks is not that we just try harder, but that we see others as God sees them. And in seeing them as God does, we might be reminded that we’re *all* his favorites.

Amen.