

A WAY OF GRACE

In the study guide that accompanies his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey relates a story about something that happened at a British conference on comparative religions. Experts from around the world were debating what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. How would you respond in that conversation? The participants began eliminating possibilities like incarnation and resurrection – other religions had accounts of these. Apparently the discussion went on for some time until C. S. Lewis entered the room and inquired what all the commotion was about. Lewis said that the answer to Christianity's unique contribution among world religions was easy – grace.

It seems that after some further debate all agreed. "The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of *karma*, the Jewish covenant, and Muslim code of law – each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional."ⁱⁱ

The passage from Ephesians that we read this morning is all about grace – *by grace you have been saved* – it can't be said much more clearly than that. How are we saved? By grace! Not by what we do or don't do – we would never make it that way. Not even by how strong our faith is. We respond in faith, but we are loved and saved by God's grace alone. This is what it is to be a Christian – to live knowing and believing and living "grace".

The first part of Ephesians is widely regarded as part of a baptismal liturgy. It seems appropriate for the church to prepare candidates for baptism in Lent. And what most needs to be impressed on the baptismal candidate on the occasion of being set apart for God and God's service in a world confused and estranged from its Creator? What does he or she need to understand about Christianity's exceptional gift among world religions? How can the individual be helped to understand what it means to be a Christian? We can do for the baptismal candidate what the writer of Ephesians does for the reader – interpret what is happening to a person entering the Christian life. This is not an academic exercise but something common and necessary to every community. It is what a parent does when a child asks, "What is that noise?" or "Do hamsters go to heaven?" It is what a physician does when a patient worries about numbness in the left arm or intense headaches. Teachers do it, lawyers do it – friends, spouses and neighbors all interpret experience for others. And so do churches. In fact, interpreting is a primary activity of the community of faith and its leaders. *What does it mean to become a Christian?*

We all know that it has to do with resurrection – Christ's and our own. Baptism symbolizes the dying and rising of believers with Christ so *that* risen Christ is now alive in the faithful. In fact, this text says, *you were dead – you were walking a sinful path*. We were dead – caught in a futile way of life – obedient to desires of the flesh, seeking the approval of our culture, heeding every inclination that leads away from God, aimless and helpless to extricate ourselves. We were dead – estranged from the giver of life and utterly helpless to do anything about it by our own power. It is not even that we choose sin, we simply acquiesce to it. We walk without thinking along the path that the world sets out for us. Dead is what we were – alive in Christ is what we are meant to be. The old ways of living end; the new life in Christ begins.

Entering the Christian life means knowing that you are dead – there is no resurrection without death. We are dead and God loves us into life. We are empty and God fills us. The rich, substantial and abundant love of God are not new inventions that appear when we become

Christian. The deep and passionate love of God is present for us even when we are so absent from God – when we have walked so far along another path that we might as well be dead. But God – rich in love and mercy – by free unmerited favor- by grace, quickens our life and sets us in a safe place in the constant presence of Christ.

The text says, *by grace you have been saved*. You are now alive, but this is just the beginning. We are lifted onto an Emmaus Road – a journey with Christ Jesus – a grace-filled path. And this is not for the short term; it is not temporary but eternal – enduring forever. The depth of God’s amazing love cannot be plumbed in our brief time upon this earth – even if we lived for ten thousand years we would not begin to exhaust the richness of God’s grace.

By grace you have been saved through faith. I am saved – I am being saved – I will be saved. Salvation extends from the foundation of the world that *God prepared beforehand, to the ages to come* – from nothingness to heaven. The life of the believer is set in a narrative far grander than the narrow parentheses of one lifetime.

Salvation is not our doing and it is not the result of works – we can take no credit whatsoever for it. This gift of God’s gracious love becomes real for us through faith – faith opens us to grace. We are not saved because of our faith – we are not saved by committing our life to Christ or by any other religious action. We are saved by the grace of God. There is no question of which came first in this scenerio. There is no chicken and egg dilemma. Grace comes first.

What does it mean to become a Christian? First we must recognize our own emptiness and see the mercy of God’s love that is shown to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When we can put our confidence in God’s gracious gift of Christ – when faith frees us from self reliance – when we are truly poured out we are able to see and receive God’s grace.

Grace is what we are all about as a Christian community and as individuals who seek to follow Christ. Jesus communicated grace in his life and in the parable he told – they show us who God is and how God loves. His life and his message are the good news and it is not a gospel that we would have come up with as humans on our own. We would have wanted to honour the worthy over the wasteful – the righteous over the reckless. We would have expected that being good was the most important thing to come into relationship with God. But Jesus shows us and tells us that God ignores that fancy religious teacher in favour of the ordinary sinner who pleads for mercy – consistently chooses real people over good people – rejoicing when the one sinner is saved.

But what has God’s grace saved us for? Not only to make us whole again – not simply in order to enjoy God’s grace. We have been created again as God’s masterpiece – as God’s work of art – for two purposes: to show what God can do through Jesus Christ, and to serve human need, engaging in good works which reflect the nature of God as gracious love. Our way of life as Christians living in the real world and ultimately in life beyond death does matter.

We are created to do good works – it is God’s desire for us. This gift of grace we have been given calls forth a response. Christian life is more than acceptance of the forgiveness of sins – more than personal transformation – more even than receiving God’s grace. It is participation in God’s divine love – *living* the grace we have received. There is work to be done, good work – a message to be proclaimed – service to be rendered – hostility to be overcome – injustice to be rectified – hospitality to be offered. God has prepared the way for us to live, a path to walk – a way of grace. **Amen.**

This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word
The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh, 2009

ⁱ Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace? – Study Guide*; Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan; page 32.