

Grace Meets You Where You Are



It was a Saturday afternoon I'll never forget. I was 17 years old and hanging out at a friend's house when I found myself kneeling next to an old Jeep, my trembling hands clasped together as I cried out to God. It was more out of sheer exhaustion and desperation than any religious formality.

At that point I realized my life was killing me—from my very own choices. I was living from moment to moment, crisis to crisis, looking for the next experience—drinking, stealing, sex, anything—that would make me feel alive inside again. For years, I had been trying to escape from the pain of life's circumstances.

As I knelt there, alone, I didn't realize what I was doing and didn't really care. But I knew I was giving up—and that's all that mattered to God.

Before that afternoon in my friend's garage, I had felt so disconnected from God, from myself and from those around me that I had escaped into a world of distractions. Alcohol, stealing and promiscuity were not the problem; they were my feeble attempts to solve the problem.

The real dilemma? I didn't know who I was. I didn't know who

God thought I was. In other words, I didn't understand grace.

The Distractions of Life

When I look back at that pivotal time in my life, I am amazed at how far God has brought me. I now understand more about grace than I did then—mostly from asking some soul-searching questions that I'd like to share with you now.

Do you really know who you are? Do you see yourself as God sees you? Are you living the dream that you and only you were meant to live? Do you imagine a future that releases you to be what He made you to be? Or are you too distracted by a sinful life or religious roles to even think about it at all?

Our attempts to clothe ourselves in the distractions of life—both the sinful and the spiritual—are open betrayals of the fact that we have forgotten we are sons and daughters created by almighty God. Stripped of our royal robes and noble purposes, we live our lives trying to clothe a cold and embarrassing nakedness with the skimpiness of possessions or position.

John Eldredge and the late Brent Curtis, in their book *The Sacred Romance*, put it this way: "Very seldom are we ever invited to live out of our heart. If we are wanted, we are often wanted for what we can offer functionally. If rich, we are honored for our wealth; if

beautiful, for
our looks; if intelligent, for our brains. So we learn to
offer only
those parts of us that are approved, living out a carefully
crafted
performance to gain acceptance from those who represent life
to us.”

The heart that truly understands grace relates to God not
through obedience and duty as much as desire and gratefulness.
But to
move from mere obedience to gratefulness requires us to have
our
identity rooted in who Christ has made us to be.

The Power of Weakness

I recently counseled a married couple who began to argue
loudly during the session, ignoring me in an angry exchange
that
revealed each spouse’s exceptional skill at the art of
wounding the
other. As the verbal combat escalated, something strange
happened. They
suddenly became aware that I was still in the room. You could
see the
shock all over their faces. They were horrified that I, their
pastor,
had seen this side of them.

Immediately they became pleasant again, and even exchanged
some mild compliments with each other. I addressed their
obvious
discomfort by asking them if they were more comfortable before
or after
they let me see the dark side of their marriage.

It was clear they regretted embarrassing themselves in

front of me. It wasn't until I told them that I liked them better and could help them more when they weren't concerned with what I was thinking about them that they felt free to be themselves again.

But notice that, for them, to feel free wasn't the same as feeling good about their marriage—at least not for a long time. For them, freedom meant having the permission to feel bad about their marriage and about themselves, and to not be afraid to show it.

As Christians, we are not called to be without weakness. We are called to understand our weakness so we can exchange it for the strength of the cross—itsself a picture of great power clothed in the ultimate weakness of death.

With His sacrifice, Jesus became the original Wounded Healer. Jesus calls all those who come after Him to heal His broken world, not through their own strength, but through the redemption of their broken lives.

God chose us because we were broken, not because we were whole. He picked us out of the crowd because we were falling apart, not because we had it together. He came to heal those of us who were sick, not those who have no need of a physician. As Paul wrote, “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak

things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27, NIV).

So if God has chosen us not because of our strength but because of our weakness, why are we trying to hide our broken lives instead of being comfortable with who we really are?

Forgotten Beginnings

Why are so many of us uncomfortable with who we are or where we are in life? Because we are not firmly convinced that we bear the image of the One who made us.

Genesis paints an amazing picture of our creation: "God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27, NKJV).

In this incredible passage, God has just finished creating the world. He looks at it and is pleased. He says that it is good. From God, this is high praise indeed. And yet, it is not complete. He sees nothing that is truly a reflection of Himself.

As He turns to make man, He creates him in a way that does not reflect any other part of creation. God doesn't model man after the most glorious mountain. He doesn't model him after the vast seas of the earth. He doesn't turn His attention to His creation but to Himself.

He paints a self-portrait. He designs us to be a likeness of Himself. We became the pinnacle of all creation. We became image-bearers of the Most High God. And for a while, it worked out great.

You know the story. Adam and Eve were given the choice to continue being exact likenesses of God or to roll the dice and choose their own image. They gambled and lost, big time. They traded the glory of God for the glory of man—earning for themselves the sin nature that we, as their descendants, still carry today.

In that instant, we became something less than what we were meant to be. Like a mirror that no longer reflects anything, we became altogether worthless. Our self-image, which was designed to grow from the image of God in us, withered in the tragic soil of the fall.

New Beginnings

It's no wonder so many of us struggle to know who we really are. Even though we know in our heads Christ died and rose again for us, our self-image is rooted in the fall and not the resurrection. We have accepted an image of loss instead of redemption. We will not recover our identity until we understand the true power of grace. So, what exactly is grace?

Grace is God's desire to be in relationship with you regardless of your circumstances. That includes everything you have done or had done to you in the past, present and future. God's love is not based upon how you relate to Him through mere obedience. God's love for you is based upon His inexhaustible desire to be close to you.

His grace
offers several benefits.

Grace allows the believer to live free. I can remember living apart from Christ, and it was anything but free. I was constantly plagued by a sense that I had to create a good life. “You only go around once,” was my motto. It was up to me to make it a good trip.

I no longer believe it’s up to me to make my own success or happiness. My responsibility is to respond to what God puts in front of me, and through my response, His Spirit will continue to unveil the person God has created me to be. As Paul says, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18). It’s His job, not mine. I no longer have to perform for God or myself.

Grace allows us to move beyond the past. After counseling people for more than a decade, I can say with conviction that everyone I’ve ever met has a history he or she is running from. The good news of God’s grace is that the past can remain where it is—in the past! We deny the power of the resurrection when we allow the past to decide who we are.

The idea conveyed in Scripture is that we are new creations. The old life has died and lives only to the degree that we give it life. The Bible says, "A new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining" (1 John 2:8).

Before grace, all we knew was darkness. Now it is our choice to let it pass and embrace the true light that is already shining in us.

Grace allows us to help redeem the world. We live in a time in which it is not enough to share the message of the gospel.

We must share ourselves along with the words. In order for the world to be transformed it needs our stories of brokenness.

It was not a coincidence that Jesus came into this world as a helpless baby. It was no coincidence that He lived as a servant. If He wanted, Jesus could have lived like a king. But He knew that was not our experience. He knew that we were hurting and that we were confused and in need of someone who could identify with us. Jesus didn't come into this world to save us from brokenness but from the illusion of wholeness.

That's our mission in today's world. We aren't called to live as plaster saints. We are to live as wounded healers. Our stories, especially the ones filled with anguish, are the bridges God uses to

walk into the lives of others. "They overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Rev. 12:11).

True Grace vs. Tolerance

If grace is the tool God uses to transform the world, then tolerance is the tool Satan uses to usher in hell on earth.

Tolerance is certainly the buzzword of the day. And at first glance, it looks a lot like grace. It's nice. It seems forgiving, patient and kind. But tolerance is a road that leads to death.

Dorothy Sayers once said: "In this world it's called tolerance, but in hell it is called despair. The sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, enjoys nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing but remains alive because there is nothing which it would die for."

Despair is the natural conclusion of a life lived in tolerance. Grace finds its roots in the cross and the resurrection.

Tolerance finds its roots in apathy and fear.

Christ's offer of grace to us through His death on the cross demonstrated His convictions, His belief that mankind needed a rescuer and His determination not to leave us to our own devices. He was bruised, He was cut, He was nailed, and He was pierced so that we could have a relationship with God.

Tolerance allows others to continue in sin because it is too afraid to offer help. Our world is full of people who are

watching
in silence as those around them perish apart from Christ
because they
value other people's freedom to choose their own way more than
they
value the people themselves.

When my son was a toddler, he darted out into the street
in front of a car. I had a choice at that moment. I could sit
in silence
embracing my son's choice and allow him to be killed, or I
could help
him.

Obviously, I reached out and jerked him back to safety. It
would have been monstrous for me to be apathetic in a moment
like that.

Nevertheless, the cardinal rule of tolerance is no
interference even
though interference is actually the most compassionate act.

What true grace offers us is the opportunity to be a
friend of God, and we are closest to God when we are most
aware of our
need for grace—when we are most aware of our own brokenness.
It is this
brokenness that creates the space for God, and it is through
the
embracing of our weakness that His sacrifice is made real to
us.

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