

Text: John 1.17-19
St Stephen's

2/24-25, 2007
Sat/Sun

"Gift after Gift after Gift"

In Lent this year, we will offer a series of weekend messages and midweek forums that focus on the message of God's grace. On Wednesday nights we are looking at Grace in Families. On weekend messages we are looking at Grace in the life of Jesus.

There are a **several reasons** that we are doing this in the season of Lent this year.

1) Grace is the Great Theme of the Bible

One is that **grace is one of the great themes of the Bible**. From beginning to end we hear about grace, but above all, we hear about grace in the New Testament and the life of Jesus. In fact Paul sums up our status before God with words like this...

You no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

Romans 6:14 (NLT)

That is a radical set of words. You are not under the requirements of God's law! You are under the freedom of God's grace!!! No condemnation. No exacting requirements. No pressing guilt. Jesus is the 'end of the law' (Rom 10.4) Take a large breath! This is what happens to people who yield to Jesus. You live in the freedom of God's grace.

Let's start with a definition of grace:

- Grace is when you mess up, badly, and Jesus comes to you and stoops to wash your feet. David Barnhouse, "Love that reaches up is adoration, love that reaches out is compassion, but **love that stoops is grace.**"
- Grace is when you're a sheep and you just don't care about the others and you wander away from God and get lost and the shepherd walks right out after you. That's grace.
- Grace is when you can't do what you have to do and you fail and

God comes alongside you and lifts you up and gets you through it. That is grace.

- Grace is when God accepts you into his family no matter who you are, or what you have done. No matter at all. That's grace.

PZ says grace is "**One Way Love**" Unearned, Undeserved. One way. No matter what, where, when, who...

The one way love of God is the **central message** of the Bible. Before he made you, God loved you. When you hated him, God loved you. Before you loved him, God loved you. When you ran from him, he came after you. When you kept your life from him, he gave his life for you. That is the one way love of grace. You can't make God love you **more**. You can't make Him love you **less**. He loves you just as much on your **bad days** as He does on your **good days**. It's called **grace**. And it is amazing. It is the central message of the Bible.

2) We Need More Grace!

There is a **second reason** that we are doing this in Lent. We **all** need grace. And we **don't get enough**. Looking around the world today, there is so much judgment. So much criticism. People hunger for grace.

The reason it is so hard to find is that there is a very effective enemy of grace loose in the world, '**legalism**'. Legalism is **the spirit of control** over other people's lives. It **often adds man made regulations to God's commandments**, and uses them to control people. Legalism is grim, rigid, exacting, petty, and eventually, lifeless. **It kills life, and grace, and love**. I think there is **too much of it** in the very places that should be oases of God's wonderful grace. I think there is too much of it **in the church!**

If you ask Americans **what they think of evangelicals**, they will **rarely** use the word **gracious**. Or loving. Or forgiving. They will use words like **judgmental**, and **narrow** and **mean-spirited** and say that we are more known by what we are **against** than by what we are for. We often wear a sour "No" face than a hopeful "Yes" face. Legalism wears a "No" face. Grace wears a "Yes" face. Don't you just love being with people

who are full of grace? And don't you just like to avoid people who have a critical spirit? There just isn't enough grace around.

Philip Yancey (What's So Amazing About Grace?) tells the story of a **woman caught in sexual addiction**, whose life had become so broken, that she was even selling her children into child prostitution. She was crushed by what she had become and came to a counselor for help. He was trying to put together a team of people to help her, and asked her if she had ever come to the church for help. She said, "Church? Why would I go there for help? I already feel bad enough about myself!!" Ouch!!! But people like that **flocked to Jesus**.

I watched **a great movie about grace** last week. It was made in 1954, starred Jimmy Stewart and was called "Harvey" ELWOOD Dowd (Jimmy Stewart) is a **very kind man** who is always visiting bars and befriending total strangers, spending hours listening to them, and then bringing them home for dinner and helping them out. And he is so unreasonably kind to people. But— he says he has this **invisible friend**, a 6 ft rabbit named Harvey, who he is always chatting with and introducing to people. Elwood's **one way love** has this wonderful impact on people. They become kind. They find hope. They find healing in their lives. People take a turn for the good.

Well his sister and family just can't put up with this invisible friend of Elwood's any more, and they want to have him committed to an institution. But there is more to Mr. Dowd and his invisible friend than we first see, and finally as their efforts fail we have this scene as Elwood leaves the institution to return home...

-- Doctor, I want to say good-bye to some of my friends before I leave.

CHUMLEY - Mr. Dowd, none of those people are your friends -- but I want you to know that I am your friend.

ELWOOD - Well, thank you, Doctor. And I'm yours.

CHUMLEY - They underestimate you - as I did. This sister of yours is at the bottom of a conspiracy against you! She's trying to persuade me to

lock you up. Today she had commitment papers drawn up. She has your power of attorney and the key to your safety box! And she brought you here!

ELWOOD - My sister did all that in one afternoon? That Veta certainly is a whirlwind, isn't she?

CHUMLEY - Good heavens, man! Haven't you any righteous indignation?!

ELWOOD - Oh, Doctor, I - I - Years ago, my mother used to say to me -- she'd say, 'In this world, Elwood, you must be --' oh, so smart or oh, so pleasant.' Well, for years I was smart. I recommend pleasant. And you may quote me.

3) Only Grace Changes People

And there is **one more reason** why I think we need more grace around here. That is because **only grace can change you**. Legalism can't. The law is not able to change the human heart. All it can do is **restrain us**. Tie us up. Prohibit us. Say 'no'. But even while it restrains us it **enrages us**. A heart that is restrained and enraged is not the goal of the gospel. But that is all the law can do. The law is **good and right and true**, but **not able to produce what it demands**. It is impotent.

When we were controlled by our old nature, sinful desires were at work within us, and the law aroused these evil desires that produced a harvest of sinful deeds, resulting in death.

Romans 7:5 (NLT)

The good and righteous law of God intersects with our fallen sin nature and **loses the battle** every time. Because it attacks our autonomy and our independence and produces **rebellion**. The law actually **produces what it prohibits**. Have you ever told your kids not to do something? Have they ever sweetly and quickly done what you have asked? Ever?

The motto of our church is **God changed lives**. The **law will not get us there**. You cannot push or pull or manipulate or bulldoze people into godliness, into Christlikeness. Only grace can unlock and transform the rebellion of the heart. Only God's one way love can get us there. **Grace**

grows what it gives. It heals the heart's desperate anxiety, fills the heart's aching aloneness, **reforms the heart so that it is like the heart of Jesus.**

Say it with me: "The law produces what it prohibits, but grace grows what it gives."

This is **John's summary of Jesus' life and ministry:**

And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. John 1:16-17 (ESV)

Here is the way the Message paraphrases those words:

We all live off his generous bounty, gift after gift after gift.

God recommends living and giving of the one-way love of Jesus, "gift after gift after gift..."

I have thought a great deal about my life over these past two years. I think Elwood's mother is right. In this world you have to either be smart and driven and driving – or pleasant and gracious and full of one-way love. I've done the first. I would very much like to do the second. And you may quote me! **And even join me!**