

**A Demonstration of God's Love
Luke 15:11-31, Romans 5:6-8**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we continue to look at what the scriptures tell us about God's love, from what we have just read about it in Romans 5:8 we can say that another way of understanding God's love is that it is undeserved grace.

Now grace is one of those words which is easy to use but is hard to explain, it's a lot like "love" in that regard.

So we might attempt a definition by saying *"well, grace is different from justice and mercy. Justice is getting what you deserve, mercy is when you don't get what deserve – but grace is when you get something good that you don't deserve!"*

And that's not a bad definition, however as we acknowledged last week, we live in a society that has a very difficult time understanding what God's love really means.

The first instinct in our culture is to contrast love against judgment so that love then means there is no judgment.

So if we are to take the message that God's loves us and share it with our society – perhaps you can see the challenge that will present itself when we tell people that God's love means that we get something good that we don't deserve.

That part about "our not deserving it" becomes a stumbling block that people find very difficult to accept. Why would there be something about us that would make us undeserving of God's grace?

So brothers and sisters, the thing about God's undeserved grace is that you can't really get it – unless you've actually experienced it – and this puts us in a catch 22. We are trying to explain God's love to people who don't know what it is, and they can only understand it if they've already experienced it.

That's a problem – but the good news is that if we know how to tell a good story – especially if it's our story - as an "undeserved grace story" then we are able to help people vicariously experience God's love as undeserved grace so that see how God's grace also extends to them, and respond to it.

You see God made stories to allow us to experience, and thus understand, something that we haven't experienced before in our own lives. In doing so we come to an awareness of how it is a reality in our own lives as well – but a great deal of how this works depends on how well the story is crafted and told.

But don't worry – if you have experienced undeserved grace in your life... then you will be able to learn to share about that experience with the authenticity and passion that a good story needs in order to be effective...

And this morning we're going to look at some of the additional aspects that you need to include in order to create and share a good "undeserved grace" story by looking at the most famous of all the "undeserved grace" stories in the scriptures... the story of the prodigal son from Luke 15.

But before we look more closely at this story it's helpful to recall other stories that we may know – ones where people get what they deserve.

Because, some bible scholars believe that there was a popular story in Jesus' time about a man with two sons that was told to illustrate and teach the benefits of honoring your father and the consequences which could happen when you didn't.

In that popular story the one son who demands his share of the estate and goes and squanders his father's wealth in wild living eventually comes to his senses and attempts to return back home as a servant... only to find out that after he acted like he wished his father was dead in demanding the inheritance, he is now dead to his father – who won't even recognize him and turns him away.

Now this sounds like a horrible version of the story Jesus tells in Luke 15 it is – but, if you lived during Jesus' time you would likely find yourself nodding in agreement with the father's actions, and concluding that the disrespectful and wasteful son was a disgrace and that he got what he deserved for dishonoring his father, wasting all that money and shaming his family!

Now we don't experience the same reaction to the original story because we live in a different cultural context. But let me share another story with you - posted on a blog site by some sales rep and we'll call it "the irate entitled customer."

(<https://notalwaysright.com/an-expensive-temper-tantrum-part-2/478>)

It goes "I sold a woman 4 phones on a family plan for her and her 3 teenage daughters. She insisted that she be put on the 500 minute plan (the smallest family plan). I informed her that most teenagers can use 500 minutes in a week and begged her to take a larger plan. She refused and became quite angry and belligerent with me for suggesting "that her daughters were not responsible adults." I noted on her account that she was advised of all overage charges and that there were to be no refunds on the account for overage charges.

One month later she returns purple faced and on the verge of a stroke with her \$3,200 phone bill and demands that the additional usage charges be taken off her bill. I say "I'm sorry, I explained the overage scale to you when you activated your phone, and begged you to take a larger plan. You insisted this

was the one you needed and I cannot refund any of the charges." After directing a string of profanity and f-bombs at myself and the company she yells "well cancel my account!"

I say "I'll be happy to deactivate your phones but that does not release you from your contract. There will be a \$240.00 charge for each phone on the account for breaking your contract and you will still be responsible for the current charges."

So the customer suddenly throws her phone at my head. I duck and it smashes into the wall in a million pieces and she unleashes more f-bombs and profanity at myself and the other customers in the store.

She then proceeds to storm out of the store get into her car, a brand new Lexus. She revs the engine, drops it into gear and hits a lamp post hard enough to shatter every piece of glass in the car as well as almost tearing the front half of the car off.

So - she then has to come back into the store, to ask someone if she can use their phone... to which another customer in the store replies "wow Karma is.... very unpleasant"

You see friends, when we hear a story like this we end up nodding in agreement that someone got what they deserved. That woman was arrogant, entitled and rude and she threw an awful temper tantrum in public, it serves her right - smashing up her own car like that and then having people refuse to let her borrow their phone. We should all take it as a lesson from this story not to be someone like that!

The point here is that the first thing that we need to do if we are going to tell a story of undeserved grace is to be aware of other stories where people get what they deserve.

And make sure that we are aware of how we feel about this as well, because the most effective stories of underserved grace play on those sentiments about what people rightly deserve for the things they have done.

Starting such as story off by describing someone as despicable, or doing something we despise or find terribly offensive and scandalous draws us into the story in a way that we are able to better connect with the idea of undeserved grace later on.

So when Jesus starts to tell a story about undeserved grace he taps into the cultural sentiment that was scandalized by a son who would be so despicable as to ask for his share of the inheritance before his father had passed away – it was like telling your father *“I wish you would just hurry up and die already so I can have your money!”*

Then to make matters worse he leaves and squanders it. He takes all the money which his father had worked hard for, invested and saved up... and he blows it on wine, women and song. This is scandalous to the people in Jesus’ day...

So the question for us then becomes – what was/is the scandal in your life? What have you done that people would find offensive and or despicable? But more importantly as how does that relate to what God would find offensive?

You see Jesus told this story because people were grumbling about him going and eating with sinners – which they thought was the equivalent to him giving approval of what these sinners did – which was offensive to God.

Now, in today's hyper-sensitive, ultra-inclusive, woke climate we tend to respond to this criticism of Jesus by *"tsk-tsk-ing those intolerant hypocrites calling people sinners for breaking silly religious laws!"* and we believe Jesus' association with *"sinners"* somehow means they really weren't *"sinners"*

But, it's important for us to know that they really were sinners – they were people who did things that were scandalous, despicable, offensive, and broke God's Covenant Law.

So what have we done that is scandalous and offensive to God because it broke His laws? The 10 Commandments are still very helpful in this regard to help us identify that.

Did we worship something or someone else besides the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Did we make something into an idol in our life? Did we take the Lord's name in vain - calling ourselves Christians but not walking the talk. Or were we guilty of not observing the Sabbath – working all the time, striving, never resting to enjoy God and God's creation and worshipping Him?

Was it some form of murder, or adultery, stealing, lying, or coveting what rightfully belonged to someone else? Or like the prodigal son we did not honor our father and mother and we rebelled against their teaching and instruction and how they tried to raise us? What was it that you can identify which was offensive to God?

So – telling people about God's love as undeserved grace is not always easy because it means that we have to be honest about things that were scandalous in your own life – both socially and especially before God.

So this does not leave much room for keeping up appearances – but friends, sometimes that kind of vulnerability is exactly what someone else needs to hear as they are wrestling with shame and guilt and thirsting for forgiveness for what they have done wrong in their life.

So a good and effective "undeserved grace story" needs to start with genuine honest sharing and admission of whatever was scandalous and offensive to God in your own life.

Now, if your story starts with offensive behavior such as lying, or stealing, coveting, adultery, or murder... anyone who is listening will understand this as scandalous behavior and understand why it is offensive to God.

But, a lot of people that I've met don't have that sort of rap sheet, so as you are looking for what you have done that offended God it's probably going to be one of the first five commands – and a lot of non-Christians don't understand why worshiping another God, or idolizing something or taking God's name in vain is scandalous or offensive to God.

Which means your story will need an analogy of some type that will help them understand why your idolizing, or false worship or dishonoring your parents offends God as much as intolerance or racism or sexism offends them.

And that's what Jesus was doing the story of the prodigal son – it was an analogy of something they would understand as scandalous and offensive that would teach them about

something that they did not understand was scandalous and offensive to God, their self-righteousness.

But in order to make the story work brothers and sisters, Jesus flips the story around and changes the ending, in Jesus' version - the son gets what he doesn't deserve – grace.

And friends - that is the other half of telling your “undeserved grace” story. You need to start out with what was scandalous, and people will be expecting a certain ending where you get what you deserve – but you didn't get what you deserved... so you need to be able to flip the story around and share how it came about... How you received what you didn't deserve.

So in the story of the prodigal son, when the money runs out and reality finally comes crashing down on him and he hits rock bottom wishing he could eat pig food... the scripture says *“he came to his senses”* (vs 17)

So our stories need to share how and when did we came to our senses and realized what we really deserved.

Maybe our reputation or job or relationships were at stake?
But most importantly share about how you realized you're your eternal life with God was at stake.

Then you need to share you how, like the prodigal son, you went to God to confess that you had done wrong, that you had sinned against Him and against others, and specifically admitted what that was.

But there's an important part in this that you can't skip past. In the story of the prodigal son, we need to notice that the father sees the son returning and runs to him, and then the Father embraces him with compassion – and only then does the son get the chance to confess what he has done wrong.

So don't forget to describe how God the Father sought you out – whether that was through hearing or reading the good news about how the Father sent Jesus to die for our sins... or whether it was through the actions of the Church or individual Christians who embraced you with compassion in spite of what you had done wrong.

This is the first instance of receiving that we did not deserve, before we even have a chance to make our appeal – and thus perhaps convince God to give us grace, in which case we did deserve it because of our successful appeal, this is why Paul says “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” Rom 5:8

And this is why I'm saying that God's love is undeserved grace.

Now a very important truth to remember is that receiving undeserved grace does not mean that one approves of the sin - that still needs to be confessed – but Grace is part of the means by which the Holy Spirit is going to bring about that confession, and this is why Jesus went to eat with sinners and this is what his critics did not understand.

That's really important brothers and sisters – because we don't want people's sin to get in the way of our telling them that God loves us and that God's love is “undeserved grace” – yes there things are going on in their lives which they might still need to confess to God, but it is his Love as undeserved grace which will help them acknowledge and confess that.

And people may even take advantage of that undeserved grace at first – but we need to trust that the Lord will use it eventually to change their lives.

Let me share another great story about how this works.

Remember the scene in “Les Mis” where Jean-Val Jean, a fugitive on the run from the law, is helped by a kind Bishop who graciously gives him dinner and a room for the night.

But Jean takes advantage of that grace and steals the silverware and a silver candlestick and leaves in the middle of the night. The next morning he is caught by the police and they drag him back to the Bishop to return the stolen items before they will throw him back in prison.

But the Bishop flips the story around and says *“I’m sad you had to leave so soon – in your rush you forgot to take the other candlestick which I gave to you along with the silverware”*

So the Bishop gives him the other candlestick and lets him go free without any charges – undeserved grace.

But as Jean leaves, the priest says to him *“Jean Valjean my brother you no longer belong to evil. With this silver, I have bought your soul. I’ve ransomed you from fear and hatred, and now I give you back to God.”*

You see brothers and sisters, the undeserved grace that we extend to others in whatever form it takes – be it a silver candlestick or a welcoming handshake - embodies the undeserved grace that God extends to all of us in Jesus Christ to reclaim us back for himself.

And it’s important to make sure we finish our stories by sharing how we received something that we didn’t deserve, and how that embodied and led us to the forgiveness and new life God gives us in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and how we now belong to God.

This happens in the story the prodigal son when the son is restored to his status in the father’s house, given fine clothes and jewelry and having a feast thrown in his honor.

We must explain how the undeserved things we received point to the spiritual reality - that we must accept by faith because we can't see it or even always feel it - that through the work of the Holy Spirit we are undeservedly clothed with Jesus Christ – his perfect humanity becomes our humanity...

That His status with God becomes our status with God, and we have become part of God's family who will celebrate His return to make this world new again and get rid of sin and evil.

And this is important, friends, because a story of undeserved grace is not about trying to escape what we deserve, and sometimes the undeserved things we receive don't always include escaping the consequences of our actions

And sometimes the things we have done require that we make restitution for them – like in the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector, he paid back everything that he had stolen.

But – know this – it is only as undeserving recipients of Jesus and all the riches and mercy and grace which are in Him – that

we have the resources to make restitution for what we have done wrong, if that is needed and possible.

It gives us the courage that we need to confess to others how we may have hurt them, ask them for forgiveness and give them time to come to that place where they can...

It gives us the strength to face whatever consequences may still need to come from our actions...

And it helps those who hear our story to see how we now live out of gratitude from the undeserved grace we received...

And that gives our story the credibility it needs in order to help other people **really** understand and experience God's Love as undeserved grace in their own lives as well.

Well brothers and sisters – let's wrap up this exploration of how we can tell our stories of undeserved grace to help people better understand and even experience God's Love.

First – identify what was scandalous and offensive in your life, especially to God. 10 Commandments are helpful...

Second – be ready to use an example of what others find scandalous and offensive to help people understand your story if needed.

Third – when people expect to hear about how you got what you deserved , flip the story around and tell them how you got what you didn't deserve.

Fourth – be sure to explain how you “came to your senses”

Fifth – Tell them how God sought you out before you could even make your confession.

Sixth – tell them how you made your confession.

Seventh – share specifically what you received that was undeserved

Eight – explain how this represented what you received in Jesus Christ, his forgiveness, new life, status with God and a place in heaven.

Nine – tell how you are able to live in gratitude from what you received, and Ten – share how that gratitude enables you to make restitution or face consequences for your actions.

Brothers and sisters, do we understand God's Love as undeserved grace? I pray that we do and I pray that the Holy Spirit will help us share how we have experienced that with others – because who among us does not stand in need of God's amazing grace in Christ.

While we were yet sinners – Christ died for us.

Brothers and Sisters – God Loves You!

Amen.