

The Blessing of Undeserved Grace
Luke 15:11-31

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it would not be too far off to say that the heart or the essence of the Christian faith is grace.

And as we are working to encourage and motivate each one of us – to be obedient to the Lord in completing a Blessing Project, it would not be too far off to say that the heart of the Blessing project is about giving each of you some seed money to show somebody some grace in Jesus' name.

And if you are beginning to look for opportunities to bless someone, I'm praying that you will start to recognize the instances the Holy Spirit points out to you where somebody could use some grace – and that you would act on it.

However - grace is one of those words which is easy to use but is hard to explain. It is something which is simple enough to understand, but very difficult to really get – I might even go so far as to say that unless you have personally experienced grace... you don't really get it.

And maybe this is why some of us have not yet blessed someone? Unless we've experienced grace ourselves it's difficult to find the motivation that will keep getting back to blessing people a priority for us... and this weekly encouragement we get on Sunday won't get buried and forgotten under all the rest of our duties and responsibilities during the week. Grace makes it stay with us and nags us to make sure we go out and complete a blessing project.

So what is grace? Well we might pull out that quote and say *"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 don't deserve what you get!"* Which is clever but again what exactly does that mean?

Well, let's look at some stories of undeserved grace to help us with this. Last week we ended the message with a great story about how Tony Campolo blessed a prostitute with some grace by throwing a first ever birthday party for her, a great expression of blessing – but... we can sympathize that she deserved it right? It was her birthday.

But what about being able to go and bless those who truly don't deserve it? Last week we also read that passage from Matthew where Jesus commands us to *"love our enemies and bless those who persecute us!"*

And the point of doing something like this isn't so much that we desire to shame our enemies by heaping burning coals on their heads – but to demonstrate that we recognize this is how God has treated us.

We were enemies of God, enemies of Christ, we have grieved the Holy Spirit – but God has given us something good that we don't deserve anyways. This is why Paul says in Romans 5:8 *"that while we were **still** sinners (enemies of God) that Christ died for us."* So, if we have truly experienced this then we ought to be able to extend such grace to those who oppose and hate us.

And if we are struggling to do so, if we have forgotten that we have experienced such grace and if we need to be reminded or perhaps brought to a realization of it then hear the good

news brothers and sisters - this morning we're going to look at the most famous of all the "undeserved grace" stories in the scriptures... the story of the prodigal son, and... as we do so – may the Holy Spirit work to bring us all a renewed experience of undeserved grace this morning... amen??

But before we dig into a story we someone gets what they don't deserve its helpful to think about stories we know where people do get what they deserve.

Because 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.

And 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, but if you lived during Jesus' time and you heard that story 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 and shaming his family!

Now we may not experience the same reaction to that original story because of the different cultural context that we live in - but let me share another story with you that is more culturally applicable to us, posted on a blog site by some sales rep and we'll call it "a Karen gets some karma." (<https://notalwaysright.com/expensive-temper-tantrum-part-2/478>)

It goes "I sold a woman four 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 unfortunately 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 SC 430. She redlines 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.

She then comes 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!

And similarly we would not expect people to feel sympathetic for the drunk driver who killed a family – getting into a bad car accident on their way to court and ending up paralyzed.

Nor would we expect sympathy for the child molester getting beaten to within an inch of his life by the other inmates in prison...

We don't feel sorry for the drug lords and gang members when they start fighting and killing each other – in fact we might even think its doing society a favor - killing each other off like that, as long as there are no innocent bystanders who get hurt in the process...

So the first thing the Holy Spirit needs to bring to our attention as we seek to renew our appreciate of undeserved grace is to make us aware of the situations and circumstance where we're happy to see people get what they deserve.

The Holy Spirit needs to make us aware of our own feelings and sentiments about this first because understanding

underserved grace is a counterpoint to people getting what they deserve for the things they have done.

So when Jesus starts to tell a story about undeserved grace he taps into the cultural sentiment and makes a connect with his fellow Jews who would have been 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 the son leaves, and squanders all that wealth. 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 the scandal in our life? What have you done that people would find offensive and or despicable? But more importantly as you

reflect on this question - how were actions offensive and scandalous to God?

You see Jesus told this story because people were grumbling about him going and eating with sinners – which was in their view, equivalent to him giving approval of what these sinners did.

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

But brothers and sisters it’s important for us to know that the people Jesus was hanging out with really were sinners – they were people who did things that were scandalous, despicable and offensive and most importantly were against God’s Covenant Law. They were willing breaking most, if not all, of the 10 Commandments.

So as you reflect on the scandalous starting point for your own story – it's not just about what was scandalous in your behavior and actions because of what society thought, its ultimately about what was scandalous and offensive to God because it broke His laws.

So in this regard the Ten Commandments are still very helpful and very applicable for us – think about the Ten Commandments and which ones you were breaking??

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? This essentially means we called ourselves Christians but did not walk 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?

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?

Or it could have been murder in some form or another, adultery, stealing, lying, or coveting what rightfully belonged to someone else – what was it that you can identify which was offensive to God?

So, brothers and sisters, undeserved grace sounds great -but encountering it is not easy because it means that you have to be honest about things that were scandalous in your own life – both socially and more importantly, 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 see or hear as you go to bless them because they are wrestling with the same shame and guilt and your gesture of blessing them in Jesus' name brings the undeserved grace they are in need of!

Now, if your own sins consist of offensive behavior such as lying, or stealing, coveting, adultery, or murder... pretty much everyone understands this as scandalous behavior and even if they don't agree, can 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 people don't really grasp why worshiping another God, or idolizing something or taking God's name in vain is scandalous or so offensive to God.

Even in Jesus' day – God's people easily forgot why this was so, that's what Jesus when started his story of the prodigal son – he was starting with something they could understand as scandalous and would find offensive... in order to teach them about something which they did not understand was scandalous and offensive to God, their own self-righteousness.

But before he makes that point to them brothers and sisters, Jesus flips the story around and changes the ending, another

example of being outrageous I guess... flipping things upside-down. In Jesus' version of the story the son gets what he doesn't deserve – grace.

This comes about when the prodigal son's 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, think back brothers and sisters - how and when did you come to your senses? How was it that you came to the realization that what you were doing was offensive and disobedient to God?

And how did you come to realize that there was no life in what you were doing, that the way in which you were living – worshiping other gods, idolizing something, taking the Lord's name in vain, dishonoring your parents, lying, stealing, committing adultery and so on was no way to live your life... and you were only going to get what you deserved...

Which would be the scorn and rejection of people you know, you would lose your reputation or your job, maybe lose your relationships and your family... and ultimately you also realized that you could lose out eternal life as a consequence of your disobedience to God.

And think about 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 you specifically confessed what you had done wrong.

Now there's an important part in this reminder of undeserved grace that we 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 that God's grace has Him seeking you out before you came to confess to him. 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... who had blessed you... in spite of what you had done wrong.

It is important that we remember it in this way because otherwise God's grace is something that perhaps He bestows on us IF we make our confession of sin and appeal for His grace sincerely and contrite enough... but then it is no longer undeserved grace is it.

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

That's really important brothers and sisters – because we as followers of Jesus and as His Church and Body at Valleyview - we have an important role to play in helping people from our

surrounding community experience “undeserved grace” in how we reach out to them, how we receive them and how we bless them – in spite of whatever offensive and scandalous things are going on in their lives which they might still need to confess to God.

Do we understand that? They may even take advantage of that undeserved grace... of the blessing monies... but we need to trust that the Lord will use it eventually to change their lives, we may not see the results of the blessing... and maybe that has you hesitant this time around? Last time you did a blessing project – it didn’t produce what you expected it to.

But we still need to bless people anyways...

Maybe you’ve seen the musical or movie “Les Mis”?

Remember the scene where a kind Bishop extends hospitality to Jean-Val Jean, a fugitive on the run from the law, by taking him in to give him food and shelter for the night when no one else would. Jean then proceeds to leave in the middle of the night, stealing some valuables and a silver candlestick – but is

quickly caught by the law who discover what he has stolen and drag him back to the Bishop to have him 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 – and you forgot to take the other candlestick which I gave to you”* and proceeds to give it to him and lets him go free from any charges.

And 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.”*

Now brothers and sisters, the Priest gave this undeserved grace, this blessing to Jean Val-Jean knowing he would likely never see him again or know exactly how it changed him.

So to, we need to extend such grace, such blessings to others in whatever form it takes – be it a silver candlestick or a welcoming handshake, or \$100 cash because it embodies the

undeserved grace that God extends to all of us in Jesus Christ to reclaim us back for himself – and ultimately it is not our blessing that we are passing on, it's God's blessing and He is the one who will bring about the fruit of how it transforms.

This is symbolized 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.

When we bless others, we must trust that it will bear fruit in their lives - by faith in Jesus' name- because we won't always see the reaction to the blessing, or people might not react like we hope they will or should...

But, the blessings we are called to pass along in obedience to God are undeserved – so that should not surprise us.

Let us therefore continue to get back to Blessing people brothers and sisters, not because we are going to produce amazing results in the lives of those who are blessed – we'll leave that up to the Lord...

Let's get back to blessing people with undeserved grace because it is the natural fruit of anyone who knows they have received such from the Lord themselves – and they don't know how they could not pass it on to others.

May this be true for each and every one of us,

Amen.