

The Underserved Grace Story
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 if you are starting to recognize spiritual thirst in the people around you and you are beginning to look for opportunities to share with them how it was that Jesus met your spiritual thirst... then I'm fairly certain that the word grace would probably come up at some point in that conversation.

But 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.

Which puts us at a bit of a catch 22, because we're trying to explain something to other people which they can only

understand if... they've already experienced it, and that isn't really helpful in what we are trying to do.

So 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?

However, if we know how to share our story – or any story for that matter – as an "undeserved grace story" then we are able to help someone vicariously experience what grace is all about so that they might be able to see how God's grace also extends to them – and understand how they can respond to it so they can experience for themselves.

You see stories allow us to experience, and thus understand, something that we haven't experienced before in our own lives - so that we can come to an awareness of its reality in our own lives – 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 share about that with the authenticity and passion which 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.

But as we start to look at this story its helpful to think about the stories that we know where people get what they deserve.

Because, some bible scholars believe that there was a popular story or fable 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.

So 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 "the irate entitled customer."

(<https://notalwaysright.com/an-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 you see the first thing that we need to do if we are going to tell our story as a story of undeserved grace is to make sure that we are aware of the stories in our culture and society where people get what they deserve.

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

Starting such a story off by describing someone despicable, 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 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 your life? What have you done that people would find offensive and or despicable? But more importantly as you reflect on this question - how does what you have done 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 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.

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, sharing your story as an undeserved grace story is not easy because it means that you 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 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 that you will need to use another story about something they can relate to as scandalous or offensive in order to help them understand that your idolizing, or false worship or dishonoring your parents offends God as much as intolerance or racism or sexism offends them.

That's what Jesus was doing by telling the popular 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 that they did not understand was scandalous and offensive to God, their self-righteousness.

But before he makes that point to them brothers and sisters, Jesus flips the story around and changes the ending, in Jesus' version of the story 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 how and when did you come to your senses? Describe how you came to the realization that what you were doing was offensive and disobedient to God.

How did you come to realize that there was no life in what you were doing, that the way in which you were living – worshipping 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.

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)

So a very 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 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 love 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 – but we need to trust that the Lord will use it eventually to change their lives.

If you have seen the musical or movie “Les Mis” then you will 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.”*

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 complete our story by sharing how we received something that we didn't deserve which embodied that ultimate reality of forgiveness and a new life in Jesus Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit whereby we belong to God once again.

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.

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 - as we saw in the story of Zacchaeus last week, he paid back what 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 undeserved grace in their own lives as well.

Well brothers and sisters – let's wrap up this exploration of what grace is and how we can tell our stories of undeserved grace.

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, is your story one of undeserved grace? I pray that it is and I pray that the Holy Spirit will help you share it with others – because who among us does not stand in need of God's amazing grace in Christ.

Amen.