

5G: Grace Sunday, 10/16/22

Last week, we discovered that the secret ingredient to prayer that connects us more deeply with God and others isn't the pattern or the words we use, but the inclination of our hearts. When we pursue God as our first love, we eagerly seek to be with God in prayer and to lift up others before God.

This week we'll talk about grace. You may not have noticed this, but each of our five "G's" in this worship series have corresponded with five promises we make to each other and God when we join this church. Gathering is the promise of sharing our presence in worship and other regular gatherings of our church body. Giving is the promise of sharing our resources for the support of our church ministries. Giftedness is the promise sharing our service, both with and to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Going to God is the promise of sharing our prayer. And today, Grace is the promise of sharing our witness to Jesus, the living God, so that all may know the joy of being his disciple.

When we think of what it means to be a witness, we usually assume that means to tell others about Jesus with our words. And words can be important. But underneath our words are more important things. Our attitudes and actions must demonstrate that we have received the grace of Jesus Christ for ourselves and are ready to generously share that grace with others. Without grace, no number of words can possibly witness to the love of Christ.

How many of you enjoy buying a car? I find it difficult to buy a car without feeling like I'm paying more than I should. If it's a new car, then I always wonder how much more I'm paying than the true cost to the dealer. And if I'm buying a used car, I always wonder about prior accidents or concealed damage. Either way, I know not to put much trust in the words coming out of the salesperson's mouth. I'm much more convinced by things like Blue Book values, maintenance histories, and my prior experience with that make of car.

It turns out that the attitudes people have about churches and Christians work in much the same way. Every church says that it's a friendly, welcoming church, but newcomers will form their own opinions based on their own experiences- often within the first five minutes. Any Christian can tell you that the most basic social ethic of Christianity is love. And yet all of us can recall times when fellow ambassadors of Christ have been anything but loving to us. All of us can recall times when we've been unloving toward others.

Offering an authentic expression of grace to others is crucial if we're to avoid making an impression on others as used car salespeople. The tolerance of hypocrisy is rapidly waning with each new generation, so walking the talk is more important than ever if we hope to introduce others to the joy of following Jesus Christ. What does that walk look like?

The Apostle Paul contrasts two ways of living: Our old lives before we met Jesus, and our new lives, transformed by our rebirth in the Holy Spirit.¹ The old life we could also call the state of ungrace, while the new life is the state of grace. Which version of Pastor Bill would you rather find when you walk into church on Sunday morning? Which version of you do you think God is most honored by?

Just as we're mistaken when we think our financial stewardship decisions are private matters that have no bearing on the larger community, we'd have to have two-by-fours in our eyes not to recognize that our progress on the journey of spiritual transformation is of momentous concern to the whole Church, the whole Body of Christ.

To the extent that we don't seek out God in prayer, worship, and God's Word, and we resist the influence of the Holy Spirit on the attitudes of our hearts and our actions, our natural inclination is to sink deeper into our old selves. Grace is not a natural state of being that changes us as a matter of course. Instead, our selfish natures drive us to lies, anger, stealing, and foul and abusive language. And just as we're not thrilled to meet other people in that state, it's equally unpleasant to live that way. And that's where the Good News of Jesus Christ enters the picture.

When we promise to be faithful witnesses to the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, we're promising to seek out God, continually surrendering to the transforming work of God's Holy Spirit. When we embrace the truth that we need the forgiving love of Jesus, God begins to change us from the inside-out, and our very lives become a witness of Christ to ourselves and others by the truth we embrace, the forgiveness we offer, our hard work for the love and justice of God's Kingdom, and the helpful words we offer to others. Our growing acceptance and understanding of God's grace, turns us into witnesses of grace to others. That's the journey we promise to undertake when we join the church. And even if

¹ Ephesians 4: 2-4, 21-30.

you never join a church in your life, that's the journey Christ is inviting you on today.

Just in case we didn't recognize ourselves in those previous words, Paul offers us another look in the same passage at the contrast between the old life of ungrace and the new life of grace.² Do you recognize yourself in any of these? When was the last time you experienced bitterness, rage, or anger or spoke harsh or slanderous words? You probably didn't think of it in this way, but those were moments of ungrace. We need to flee situations of ungrace and repent of our part in them wherever and whenever they occur.

Thankfully, I'm certain you've also experienced kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness that reminded you of Jesus. Those are grace moments, and when we experience them, we need to thank God for them and eagerly, energetically seek out more of them. Grace moments don't just happen. We have to notice them, and we should seek to bring them about. Wouldn't you rather have more grace moments in your life and spend less of your life in ungrace?

The more time I spend in the Bible, the more I see the crucial role of God's Holy Spirit in living as a joyful disciple of Jesus. The kind of grace-filled life and grace-filled community that Paul describes in Ephesians is the Spirit-filled kind, marked by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. All the Godly things we're looking for in human community are made possible by the Holy Spirit: Peace, humility, gentleness, unity, patience, love and hope. They're all marks of God's grace, and we can enjoy them if we're willing to trade in our old, bankrupt, selfish lives for the new life of the Spirit.

Paul wrote many such descriptions of the Spirit-filled life. In our next reading, he uses the analogy of putting on Christ-like clothes to embody the grace-filled life. I'm reading from Colossians 3, beginning with verse 12, in the New Living Translation [{Read Colossians 3:12-17 NLT}](#)

One of my first regular jobs as a teenager was bagging groceries at the local Super Valu Foods in Golden Valley. This was back in the day when it was more common than not to have employees bag your groceries for you and self-checkouts hadn't even been imagined yet. It was what you might call a "customer facing" job, meaning that I had constant and

² Ephesians 4:31-32.

direct contact with customers as they streamed through the store with their groceries. There was no mistaking that I was a Super Valu employee, because I wore the uniform of the white shirt, brown apron, and name tag.

As a fifteen-year-old, I still had much to learn about myself and being with other people. I remember one day being called into the office to see Al, the store manager. Al sat up high in a glass-enclosed office where he could oversee everything happening on the grocery store floor. Apparently, I was having a rough day and wasn't my usual smiling self, because I got an education about that from Al, who told me that when I clocked in to work, I was expected to leave my crankiness behind and focus on serving customers with a smile. He was right, of course, and I've never forgotten that lesson, although I admit that it's still not always easy to do.

In a similar way, Paul exhorts us to clothe ourselves in certain attitudes and behaviors, much as we'd put on a uniform before reporting to school or work: Tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love.³ These are, in effect, the uniform for those of us who would be ambassadors for Jesus. But unlike a work uniform, these Christ clothes are meant to stay on as our permanent uniform, reflecting not just an outer veneer but a deep transformation from within, the very same Spirit-fueled transformation that Paul wrote about in Ephesians 4. The very same transformation that brings about peace and unity in the Body of Christ and incarnates the Word of God.

How many of the people in your life know that you're a Christ-follower, and how do they know it? Do they know it because you go to church on Sunday morning? Because you were baptized and confirmed? Because you wear a cross or have a bumper sticker on your car? Because you have a Bible? That's all fine, but if we really are to be "representatives of the Lord Jesus,"⁴ those same people ought to know you by the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life. There's really no point in trying to fool ourselves, because we definitely aren't fooling anyone else.

If you want to model more of the grace-filled life to others, you have to start by receiving more of the grace Jesus has to offer you. You can't give away what you don't

³ Colossians 3:12-14. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁴ Colossians 3:17. Ibid

have. The good news is that God wants nothing more than to fill more of your life with his powerful Spirit of love. Are you ready to let go of the old life in order to make room for the new?

Please take some time now to reflect on your witness of God's grace. How are you stuck in the old life? How are you living into the new life?



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