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GRACE IN THE BOOK OF GALATIANS

Galatians 2:20–21

One Main Thing

God is lovingly making an offer of unmerited, divine favor to humanity. Will we accept or reject the offer of his Grace?

Introduction

Jim was standing there at his front door. He was a little disoriented. It was about 8:30am, and typically his mind wasn't really working yet until his second cup of coffee. However, on this morning, while sipping on his first "cup o' Joe," wearing his favorite pinstripe, navy pajamas, and squinting down at his phone to catch whatever emails had been blitzed to him during the night, suddenly the doorbell rang. So. There he was, standing in his pajamas, cup in one hand, and opening the front door with the other to greet his curious, wide-eyed neighbor. They had been neighbors for about 1

month now, but they had still not met due to an overly busy life adjustment as Jim had accepted a job offer in a new city, and they had been so busy with the move. Nevertheless, there was the overly-eager neighbor, with a steaming hot cherry pie in hand, and something of a "welcome to the neighborhood!!" exuding from his body.

Jim—never one to be overly hostile, nor on the adverse, overly kind in temperament—was actually a little irritated at having to answer the door at a time of day that seemed a little on the early side. "9:00am," he thought to himself, "might have been a little better." At any rate, his 'better self' was attempting to master his mind, and he gently felt the dimples in the corner of his lips begin to rise and say "hello" with a mild cheerfulness—forced—through his barely open mouth, and tips of his front teeth gleaming whitely. He was demonstrating his social graces as best he could, realizing that his neighbor was trying to say "hello" for the first time.

The question that comes to my mind is: "Jim, would you really reject your neighbor's cherry pie? How rude can you be!" To accept or reject a gift, while many times is not difficult to sort out, it can, in some cases, be more complicated than we would like to admit. In this case, Jim was inconvenienced, but for him to reject the gift

... that would be downright insulting and rude. Not to mention the fact that it would very likely sour the relationship with his neighbor that he probably would have to see on a daily basis!

Going Deeper

As we delve into the subject of Grace, it is sometimes astounding to me, how we can begin by making the issue quite complicated, and then try to work our way out of it. At the end of the day, Grace is one of those ideas that quite simply focuses on the fact that God loves us and wants to do something nice for us. It is a gift—completely undeserved on our part. In many ways, it is the same as a father who decides to offer his daughter a 'slushie' from Sonic on the way home from school. Does my child deserve it? No. Do I want to make her happy? Yes! Do I want to express my love for her in this small act of kindness following a long day at school? Absolutely! At any rate, you get the point. Grace is gifting our love to others. Grace is God gifting his love to us. But better than a 'slushie' or a cherry pie, he gave us the gift of his son.

The idea of 'grace' is explicitly articulated in Paul's letter to the Galatians. It is not only the dominant theme of the letter holistically, but it shows up in small ways in Paul's words.

> Grace be to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ. (Gal 1:3)

> I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another Gospel. (Gal 1:6)
>
> But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace. (Gal 1:15)
>
> And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship. (Gal 2:9)
>
> I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain. (Gal 2:21)
>
> Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." (Gal 5:4)
>
> Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (Gal 6.18)

While a quick survey reveals that Paul likes the word in both 'heavy' (e.g., Gal 5:4) and 'light' (Gal 1:3) settings, it is essentially an expression that deals with God 'gifting' certain things to humanity. While I think Paul may whip out the word in his greetings and salutations, he doesn't do so without thought. In other words, if Paul says "I'll be praying for you"—as we so often times say

to people in their struggles—Paul would never, ever have said that expression without meaning it deeply.

I say all of this to make a simple point. According to Paul, God is standing at the door, offering the Galatians something far greater than a cherry pie, and they don't have the sense to accept the gift! Of course, if they had understood what God was offering, then, well, it might have been another story.

One of the problems we have in reading Paul's letter is that once we figure out what they were really arguing about—circumcision as a means to attain good standing before God—it seems so bizarre and foreign to us, so that we can easily lose the major point. But we need to understand why circumcision was such a big deal.

Even though circumcision is pretty common in modern America, Christians and non-Christians participate in this minor medical procedure usually without any thought toward religion but because it is a part of our culture. But circumcision had very definite religious and cultural meanings for the Galatian churches. So, the question becomes "why would they feel compelled to circumcise some of their male members, and how could this have been perceived as rejecting the gift (i.e., grace of God)?" These are good questions and they don't have a clear, definitive answer in the text. In other words, Paul's letter gives us the response to a problem, however he doesn't clearly explain to us the circumstances that led to his writing the letter. He

mainly hints at the historical context. However, with some thought and close reading, we can probably imagine a situation.

While Paul doesn't unpack the situation that led to the crisis, we know that there most assuredly was a situation and context that brought about Paul needing to write the letter. Consider a few scenarios. First, imagine that one of your loved ones, even your child, becomes deathly sick. What do we usually do in dire situations such as this? We pray. And we start making promises to God! "God, if you will save my child, I promise I'll never skip a service again…I promise I'll give more…I promise, I'll stop losing my temper." The list goes on and on. I think something similar was happening in ancient Galatia, but instead of making promises, the Galatian Christians were presented with an alternative avenue to securing the blessing of God. I would imagine that the Galatian churches were facing such challenging situations that they decided that they needed to do more to prove their devotion and faithfulness to God. In other words, their expressions of faith in Jesus Christ that led them to be baptized into Christ…these were not enough (Galatians 3:26–28). They needed to somehow prove their devotion to God. Enter the Jewish ritual of circumcision, the sign of the covenant people of God ever since the days of Abraham (Gen 17).

It is so hard for the Galatians to accept that God's grace is being offered to them, not based on their actions, but based on God's love for them! They cannot accept

the fact that they are presentable in the eyes of God, based on their willingness to simply trust and accept God's gift! As Paul says, "I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain" (Gal 2:21). They were unwilling to accept God's offer of Grace through a simple ritual of baptism. They thought they had to do more, be more, trade more with God to be worthy of it. You see the problem, don't you? We are never worthy to barter with God.

The error they made is understandable. In times of crisis, we not only make promises to God, but we also criticize God too. "God, where are you?" "How could You have let this happen?" In both cases, promises and criticisms, we are essentially going back to the bargaining table with God and saying, "did we not make this agreement clear enough? I thought the deal was, I follow you, and you bless me? Did I not prove my devotion with the first agreement? Are you punishing me now? Have you bailed on me and my loved ones?" This 'questioning of our faith' is the natural outcome of adversity. The Galatians were no doubt facing adversity and weren't sure what to do. They were wavering.

Application

Many times, it becomes difficult to see clearly what is going on. We fail to realize the key features of our lives as they relate to God. A summary might be as follows. First, we are not righteous. We mess up. We

mess up often. We say things to our spouses that we shouldn't. We fail to act and do what is right, at work, at home, wherever, and people get hurt, because we don't rise to the challenge. Again, we mess up. Second, we fail to realize how overpowering God's love is for his children. God, like a parent, looks down upon his sleeping children at night, and is simply glowing with warmth and love for us as he watches us sleep. We don't take this into consideration. Third, God, in his love, is simply trying to offer a gift to us. We do mess up, God knows it, and God is willing to overlook it. This is grace. This is God's gift. This is God standing at our door and offering to be friends, neighbors, and have a bond, a relationship with us. It is not merited! We don't deserve it! He desires it! Last, but not least, there is simply nothing we can do to make God love us more. He never gave the gift, because it was an 'eye for an eye'. This is not the situation where your neighbor does something for you, so you are going to do something nice to keep the scales balanced. This is not that kind of situation. This is more like coming home from a long week in the hospital after a terrible car accident that you have just been through, and the medical bills are running about $200,000 and you can't pay it! Then, suddenly, your elders show up and say, "the church will pay the bill." You can't pay it back! This is a gift. When you are presented with a situation like this, there is only one appropriate response: say "Thank You!" Realize the situation you are in and simply say "Thank you, God."failed to happen, doubt crept in. John knows that Jesus is the Messiah in Matt 3. However, by chapter 11

John is having serious doubts spring up because his circumstances did not meet his expectations. It is easy to see why John begins to wonder if Jesus was "The Coming One" as he waits to die in his Roman prison cell. What John expects does not match his reality.

Conclusion

As Jim stood there at his door, initially desiring to be 'irritated' for the morning inconvenience, it occurred to him what was happening. He felt guilty for his selfish thoughts. He felt ashamed that his coffee and morning emails had trumped such a kind gesture. As his smile began to grow on his face, he leaned forward, extended his hand, and said, "hello!" "Welcome to my house, neighbor! I don't think we have met yet, but I have been wanting to meet you!" Jim realized that his neighbor was offering him not only a cherry pie but also kindness and friendship. As a clear token of humility, Jim leaned forward, accepted the pie and looked his neighbor in the eye and said with as much heartfelt emotion as he had within him, "thank you. You didn't have to do that, but, thank you so much."

You see, when we decide to make our promises and offers to God service, devotion, or commitment, the real question is whether or not we have first been willing to even acknowledge what God is offering us. Are we even acknowledging his grace? We are indeed justified by our "trust" in God, and not of ourselves or our ability to keep any set of laws or guidelines. Are we

willing to accept God's kind gift or are we simply going to reject it?

Discussion

1. What is grace? What does grace look like in our world today? What is God's grace?
2. In Paul's world, the Galatian churches were attempting to practice the ritual of circumcision as a way to 'earn' their salvation by 'proving' their devotion to God. What are some ways that we might attempt to 'earn' our salvation with God?
3. What might lead the Galatians to feel the need to circumcise some of their members? How might this have 'impressed' or 'pleased' God?
4. Appreciating God's 'grace' is truly a mindset that we have based on our understanding of what God has done for us! How can we appreciate better God's kindness for us on a daily basis?