

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

4.5.14

The Grace of God – Joss Bray

This is a vitally important concept to get into our heads and hearts. It can change the way we think about ourselves and others and give us a security that cannot be taken away from us.

What is the grace of God?

Grace is getting what we don't deserve. It is as simple as that. It is the unmerited favour and blessing of God which is then plugged directly into us. It is closely linked to mercy which can be defined as *not* getting what we *do* deserve.

To understand more about grace we need to look at how we got it in the first place – because if we have become a Christian, we have received it already.

How do we get it?

EPH 2:1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

So – this is what happened; we were dead in sin, following our sinful nature. God was angry at us – we were objects of wrath - but he loved us. He had mercy on us and through Jesus he gave us new life in him.

This new life raised us up for ever to be with him and so to demonstrate his loving kindness through the ages. In summary - the mercy of God stopped us getting the punishment we did deserve. But God went further and his grace then went on to give us something that we didn't deserve.

Note that none of it originates with us! We did not choose God – he chose us. We are saved by grace – i.e. God's initiative and favour. And this grace produced faith in us – again – it didn't originate from us – it is a gift of God. And the point that Paul makes here is that it is precisely because of this, that no one can boast. What we are now in God is chosen and adopted in his family. So there is no room to claim any superiority in the family of God:

EPH 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

So there are no such things as first class or second class Christians. No one is more important than anyone else. No one is loved more by God than anyone else. In the sight of God we are most definitely equal – and even counted with Jesus as sons! Jesus is of course the firstborn son and unique in being fully God and fully human. He rightfully has that throne in the heavenly realms – but we are seated with him - now! What an amazing thought.

We won't get into the predestination issue now. But I would suggest that in practice, this is not a problem for us. Because God is outside time and knows what will happen, he knows who will be saved. It is his prerogative to choose. We don't know this – we are called to be witnesses and make disciples of all nations – that is our responsibility.

What does that God's grace do in our lives?

It's very good news for us. Especially if we have a deep down feeling that we are not worthy of anything good and don't deserve love and blessing. This is exactly the position we are all in spiritually! It's just that some of us realise it more than others. If we have low self worth, poor self esteem, lack of confidence and so on – this puts us in a great position to receive the grace of God.

Remember it is not by works but by faith so that no one can boast. So – in a sense, if we feel we have nothing to boast about, we are in a better place to understand and receive the grace of God! It really is good news for the poor in spirit – those who have been crushed, abused, feel powerless or worthless.

MT 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And there are lots of consequences of receiving the grace and mercy of God in our lives:

Our sins are forgiven. We are counted as righteous from now on – we are right with God. We are adopted into God's family. We are in a proper relationship with him as his children. His favour is on us. He wants the best for us. He supplies all our needs. We have a hope for the future. He gives us his Holy Spirit who produces good fruits in us. He gives us each other in the church to build each other up and love one another and also our neighbour. He gives us spiritual gifts to be able to do all this:

2CO 9:8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

Through the grace of God, we now have access to God as a loving father and we don't need to fear anything. We have new life and we can have it to the full. And this grace is characterized fully in Jesus.

JN 1:14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Can we lose the grace of God?

The parable of the prodigal son is very important here. It illustrates the father heart of God. We know the story of how a man had two sons and one of them asked for his share of the inheritance from his father. This was tantamount to saying “I wish you were dead and I want you to give me what would be mine if you were. I don’t care about you or my family and I want to go and do whatever I want as far away from you as possible”

This must have been a huge blow to the father – imagine it if you can for yourself. All his dreams and love for his son seemed wasted and he had not turned out the way the father had hoped at all. What would the father have felt?

So the son went off wanting nothing to do with home and family again. We know then that he had a wild time doing what he wanted but the money ran out and there was a famine – a bit worse than a double dip recession! He came to his senses and realised the situation he was in:

LK 15:20 So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’

So the important thing for today is this. The son never stopped being the father’s son. Whatever he did, the father still regarded him as his son – even though it was as if he were dead and lost. The father was looking out for him – maybe against all hope – but he was ready to recognise him from a long way off. His son was in his mind constantly. He was welcomed back with joy and feasting.

He was not rejected – and never had been. Even though the son had done his best to sever the link with the father, to discount himself from being his son, it wasn't possible in his father's eyes. This is the same for us. We can go astray and even behave as if God were dead – like the son did in the parable – but that does not stop us being a child of God. He is always longing for us to come back to him and will always welcome us.

There were consequences for the son of course. When he took himself outside his father's protection and provision he suffered. It wasn't his father's fault. However the father was ready to bless again when he came back and not cut him off completely as Jewish custom would have dictated.

This is a picture of the grace of God – we can choose not to receive but his grace is always there for us – his unmerited favour. We might put ourselves in a place where we think we have left him behind – but his love burns for us just the same. We are still his children – we cannot be unborn again.

Does that mean we can sin all we like and still be saved and loved by God?

Well, yes! Amazingly. But if we want to obey God then we won't be wanting to do that:

RO 6:11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

So thanks to the mercy of God, we are not condemned if we sin, and we are still sustained by the grace of God. However, our life is in Christ and therefore we should be dead to sin – not living as though we were still slaves to it.

The Challenges

Firstly to accept the grace of God for ourselves. He paid a great price for us. And why should we not want to?

Probably because we are not used to receiving unconditionally and feel undeserving – but we have seen that that puts us in the *best* position to receive.

As we do that, then the second challenge is about demonstrating that grace to others. Is our attitude to those closest to us always one of blessing and favour and love even if they don't appear to deserve it? Do we remember the unmerited grace and mercy that God has poured out on us when we are dealing with other people who we may see as not worthy or deserving?

Specifically, how would we like to change our attitudes and behaviour to our spouses, children, other relatives, church family, work colleagues, school mates etc - the list could go on. Even more challenging is our attitude to people who have done some obviously bad things, or who have “only themselves to blame” for their situation.

This brings us back to the beginning. It is exactly where we were when God in his mercy forgave us, saved us and by his unconditional grace blesses us now! We, above all people, should be the ones who demonstrate that same love and acceptance that God has shown us.