

JESUS' TWO PARABLES OF GRACE

Without using the word *grace*, Christ left us with the clearest possible expressions of it.

Grace is generally defined as “God’s unmerited favor toward humanity and especially his people, realized through the covenant and fulfilled through Jesus Christ.”¹ The idea of “unmerited favor” is generally highlighted in such definitions because it is perceived as the “essence of grace in biblical terms.”²

Two of Jesus’ parables place the emphasis of grace on unmerited favor, not in the typical God-to-person context, but in the person-to-person context. Indeed, the teaching is decidedly pastoral. These parables of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21-35) share the following characteristics:

1. Both are introduced as Jesus’ responses to questions posed by His

hearers. In the first the query of the expert in the law is, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25, NIV)³ and more specifically, “Who is my neighbor?” (vs. 29). In the second Peter inquires, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matt. 18:21).

2. Both deal with how a person treats another. Hence, they are in the concrete context of human behavior.

3. Both are triadic. In the first, the thieves, by having the same intent, are lumped together as one character; the priest and Levite, since they are both religious persons, form the

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second; while the Samaritan is the third. In the second parable, the king is the first character; the unjust servant is the second, and his colleague is the third.

4. Both deal with characters operating according to similar principles. The parables demonstrate similar philosophies of life as illustrated in the characters. These indicate how people live their lives.

5. Both deal with the idea of mercy. This forms the concluding issue for both parables.

Grace in the Context of the Enemy

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the discussion begins because a lawyer wants to test Jesus: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25, NIV). His motive appears to be negative because this New Testament use of the word *test* usually expresses such a connotation. Further, the words “What must I do?” “implies that by the performance of one thing eternal life can be secured. What heroic act must be performed, or what great sacrifice made?”⁴ This emphasis on doing something to gain eternal life points in the direction of merit by human action and achievement. Jesus directs the lawyer’s attention, most appropriately, to what the Law teaches. The man responds by quoting portions of the Law (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18, respectively) to show that total love for God and one’s neigh-

bor insures eternal life. Jesus answers with an imperative: “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:28, NIV). The implication is that eternal life cannot be accomplished by merit, as the lawyer suggests.

Not grasping the implications of his own words, the lawyer seeks self-justification by posing another question: “Who is my neighbor?” (vs. 29). The Jews believed that the neighbor could be only one who belonged to the covenant community, not an outsider. Already there is a hint that this definition is too limited, because the word for “neighbor” quoted in Leviticus 19:18 means more than one who lives nearby or next door.

Interestingly, Jesus does not directly answer the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” Instead, He turns it around and, by telling the parable, answers a different question: “Whose neighbor am I?” In other words, He teaches how one ought to behave neighborly. The story represents the perspective of the needs of the wounded man, who is the only person who remains on the scene of action throughout the account.

This man, whose ethnicity is not mentioned but is generally understood to be Jewish, was attacked by robbers on the notoriously dangerous 18-mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho. His desperate plight is captured in verse 30: “[The thieves]

stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.” This verse also introduces the first character in the triad. Since the thieves all had the same intention, they are grouped together. From their violent and vicious actions, they manifest a certain philosophy of life that says, “I will take what you have.” It is their actions, based on such a philosophy of life, that place the unfortunate victim in a state of emergency—indeed, in a life-and-death situation. His desperate need results directly from their atrocious and barbarous behavior.

Verses 31 and 32 describe the second triad. Since both priest and Levite are religious persons, they are grouped together. To Jesus’ listeners, the arrival of the priest would have signaled hope for the wounded man. If anyone is expected to help a mortally wounded person, surely it would be one who works on behalf of people in distress. However, “this prime representative of the religion that, in the person of the lawyer, has just agreed upon the fundamental place of love hardens his heart and passes by on the other side.”⁵

Next comes a Levite. As a religious person, he would be expected to help, though that expectation would be less than that of the priest. But he too chooses not to get involved and passes by on the other side. The similar action of these religious figures demonstrates the same

philosophy of life: “I will keep what I have.”

There is much discussion about the reasons these two avoided the wounded man. Regardless of the reason, however, we must realize that the focus here is not on why the religious leaders refused to help, but on the fact that they did not help. By telling the narrative in this way, Jesus masterfully plots the story so as to have a heightened effect on the hearers. The role of these two religious personages is to create hope and then quickly dash it to the ground: If these two do not help, who will? Further, by bringing together the priest and Levite, Jesus makes the drama even more intriguing. Certainly the priest is expected to help; but since he does not, it is not expected that the Levite will help, as Levites were subordinate to priests. Relegated to menial and secondary tasks in the temple, they were of lower rank than priests. Who, then, will help the fallen man?

“At this point the story is open to a number of possible developments. (Is it after all an anti-clerical story, and now an ordinary Israelite will come along and save the day? Will God intervene with angelic help and shame the religious figures? Is the story to be a tragedy in which the injured man’s demise brings shame upon the covenant community?)”⁶

Instead, Jesus now introduces the

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Samaritan, from whom hearers would have expected nothing. The historic enmity between Jews and Samaritans was well known. To be called a Samaritan was a deep insult, and the groups avoided contact with each other as much as possible.

The impact is heightened by Jesus’ use of contrast: “*But* a Samaritan, . . . came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him” (vs. 33, italics supplied). Whereas those who are expected to act with compassion toward the helpless victim deliberately refuse to do so, the one who is hated and despised deliberately stoops to help. Furthermore, he risks himself in doing so, and this action defines compassion.

The compassion is illustrated in what the Samaritan does for the injured man. He administers first aid, provides transportation to a safe place, pays for the man’s immediate basic needs, and makes arrangements for any future attentions he may need. In so doing, the Samari-

tan demonstrates his philosophy of life: “I will share what I have.” It is in this sharing that love is exemplified. Therefore, the Samaritan’s philosophy and action in life indicate that he is fulfilling the ethical demands of the Law: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). As such, he, an outcast, is closer to eternal life than those who count themselves as privileged members of the elect community. By their refusal to live out their own ethical system, the priest and Levite have made themselves the (new?) outcasts. They are far from eternal life.

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In His conclusion to the parable, Jesus then asks the lawyer, “Which

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of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” (Luke 10:36). The answer is obvious: “The one who had mercy on him” (vs. 37). Yet, the lawyer’s answer shows his deep-seated racism. He avoids putting the scornful word *Samaritan* on his lips and mutters a non-specific designation: “The one who showed mercy” (vs. 37, NASB). He denies identity to the Samaritan. But it is precisely the merciful acts of the Samaritan that give him identity. On Jesus’ lips, he is the real person.

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Grace in the Context of Forgiveness

The parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:21-35 illustrates grace in the context of forgiveness. It is introduced by two questions posed by Peter: “How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matt. 18:21). Jesus had just been talking about forgiveness (vss. 15-18). In that discourse, He said nothing about the number of times you should forgive someone who wrongs you. Hence, Peter’s queries. It would seem that since seven represents the perfect number, then seven instances of forgiveness would be superlative. Jesus answers that one should be willing to forgive 490 times. This wide contrast clearly dwarfs Peter’s assumption and puts the matter in bold relief. Certainly, what Jesus is teaching is that forgive-

ness should be limitless, even infinite. To illustrate this, He tells the parable of the unmerciful servant.

This is one of the kingdom parables; Jesus likens the kingdom to “a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants” (vs. 23). It is closely connected to the same genre of parables in Matthew 13 that deal with the kingdom of heaven (vss. 11, 24-30, 31-32, 33-43, 44, 45-46, 47-50). Kingdom parables often deal with the actions and behavior of the residents of the Kingdom. This parable is no different. This is underlined in that the king is about to settle accounts with some of his subjects. The parable is clearly triadic, with the main characters being the king, the first subject, and the second subject. The first subject appears in all scenes of the story, which is told from his perspective.

In the first encounter, the servant has an astronomically high debt. The use of the word *loan*, together with the extraordinarily excessive debt, suggests a royal contract with a tax collector. Hence, these servants were not slaves but officials who managed the administrative affairs of the state. The debt is described in a way that suggests an incalculable amount. It meant that the servant was absolutely incapable of repaying such a large sum. Owing to this, the king ordered that the servant and his family, together with all their possessions, be sold as repayment (Matt.

18:25). In so doing, the sovereign is following a well-established tradition. The point here is that the servant is not in a position to repay the debt. Although he has power and influence, he is in an impossible situation. To avoid the shame and loss of being sold into slavery, he throws himself on the mercy of the king: ““Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything”” (vs. 26). Again, even this is insufficient. Further, the plea approaches even a humorous dimension with the promise to repay everything.

Despite these factors, the king accepts the plea for mercy. In fact, he goes beyond the man’s request. Instead of allowing him the opportunity to repay as requested, the king “took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go” (vs. 27). The record is completely expunged. The servant has nothing to commend him to the monarch, and despite his best promise, it is impossible for him to erase his indebtedness. It is only the ruler’s compassion that saves the servant. In short, the king expresses grace. His philosophy in life is: “I will share what I have.” And this motivates the act of grace: unmerited favor to the undeserving.

In the second encounter, the forgiven servant meets a colleague who owes him a mere 100 *denarii*. This is minuscule in comparison to the debt from which he has been so recently released. Suddenly he is

enraged and treats his associate with violent hostility: ““Pay back what you owe me!”” (vs. 28). The man offers a plea that is almost identical to the one made earlier by his assailant. The only difference between both pleas is that the latter omits the word *everything*. His debt is so small that it is ridiculous even to suggest that he needs time to repay everything. That is assumed. This makes the first servant appear in an even worse light. He promises to repay everything, but he is really unable to do so. And now he refuses to give the same leniency to one who, given time, could repay more than the entire balance owed. He who has just experienced grace now acts in un-grace. He lives by the philosophy, “I will keep what I have.” He has just received forgiveness, but now selfishly keeps that same gift to himself.

Jesus deliberately contrasts these first two scenes to put the action of grace into bold relief. This also heightens the impact of the story on the hearers.

The impact is clear: Treating another person without grace, especially when one has just received grace, indicates hardheartedness and cold evil. It betrays an inner inhumanity. Even the minimum of forgiveness is not attained. Little wonder that in the third encounter (vss. 32-34), the other servants report this incident to the king, who immedi-

ately summons the unjust servant. The king reminds him that he has received grace but has not shown grace, so he deserves to be characterized as “wicked” (vs. 32). This leads to his rhetorical question: ““Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?”” (vs. 33). This question places the emphasis squarely on treating others as one would like to be treated. Just as the king willingly gives to the undeserving servant, because of his grace, so too the unmerciful servant should have been willing to share what he had just received. Instead, he has refused. In treating his colleague in this way, he is destroying the kingdom. Such cannot be tolerated. Hence, no one is saddened when the king rescinds the earlier pardon (vs. 34).

In the final verse, Jesus points out that the measure by which we forgive others is the same one the heavenly Father uses when we ask for forgiveness. The application is poignant. So back to Peter’s original query concerning the number of times we should forgive a person who wrongs us. The answer is found in our reflection on this question: How many times do we want God to forgive us? Unlimited. Though undeserving of forgiveness, we would like grace extended to us time and again (even 70 times seven). The point of the parable is “that the spirit of genuine forgiveness recog-

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nizes no boundaries. It is a state of heart, not a matter of calculation.”⁷

Although these two parables do not mention the word *grace*, they certainly illustrate the premium placed on grace in the teachings of Jesus. Indeed, true religion is seen in how we treat one another. Grace enables us to be a neighbor and help even those who treat us like the enemy. This is what the first parable teaches. The second teaches us that grace enables us to forgive others even as we would like to be forgiven by God. In both, it is our concrete actions toward other human beings that are important. To neglect the fallen and disenfranchised is to be like the priest and Levite, whose religious formalism kept them cold and detached from serving humanity. To be unforgiving is to be as wicked as the first servant, whose selfishness made him heartless. But to serve humanity and to be forgiving are the

best illustrations of what it means to have grace. The word does not need to be on our lips, but its essence must be the guiding principle in our hearts and must be reflected in our treatment of people. □

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- ² Horace O. Duke, *Where Is God When Bad Things Happen?* (Mumbai: St. Paul’s, 1999), p. 104.
- ³ Unless otherwise specified, all Bible texts in this article are quoted from the New International Version
- ⁴ Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 313.
- ⁵ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35B (Dallas: Word, 1993), p. 593.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 594.
- ⁷ William Hendrickson, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), p. 704.

