

Living Graciously

We've been talking about grace over these past three weeks and now we'll end this little series by looking at this topic from what I think of as a whole different angle -- and that is to try to understand what is meant by living graciously. Why go there? Because this word is used to describe Jesus, both as He was beginning His ministry and again as John looked back over His life's work. Both Luke and John describe Jesus as exhibiting grace, not in some theological or doctrinal sense, just that He was a man who lived graciously -- and I think it would be worth our while to explore what they meant by that term.

First of all, let's look at the few texts we have, starting with Luke 2:40. This verse describes the time Jesus spent as a child growing up in Nazareth:

And the child grew and became strong; He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him.

The next passage describes the trip to Jerusalem that Jesus' family made when He was 12 years old and their losing track of Him while He was conversing in the temple courts with the teachers of the law. After they had found Jesus and returned home, we're told in v. 52:

And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

The final passage from Luke's gospel comes as Jesus is beginning His ministry. He has read from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth and after sitting down again, He said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." The next verse comes just before the conflict in which they tried to kill Him by throwing Him over a cliff, and it describes the people's first impressions of Jesus:

All spoke well of Him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from His lips.

So here we see Jesus as a young boy, then again at the beginning of adulthood -- they started that younger in those days -- and again as He began His public ministry. And at each important juncture of His life, the observation is made that God's grace or favor was with Him and that He was marked by wisdom.

I looked through the Old Testament use of the English word "gracious" and found that it appears 36 times, and 33 of those occasions gracious actions are ascribed to God. After Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle by the Philistines, David said of them that in life they were loved and gracious -- quite a thing to say about a man who kept trying to kill him. The other two exceptions come from the wisdom of Solomon. Proverbs 22:11 says:

He who loves a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for his friend.

And in Ecclesiastes 10:12 we read:

Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious, but a fool is consumed by his own lips.

Why go back to those passages? Because this word is used to describe Jesus,

gracious speech seemed to be one of His defining characteristics, and other than David's seemingly exaggerated praise of Saul and Johnathan, gracious words and gracious actions are repeatedly seen as God's words and God's actions.

Two women, Sarah, the wife of Abraham and, centuries later, Hannah, who would become the mother of Samuel, were both barren. But, in both cases, we are told that God was gracious to them, heard their prayers and allowed them to conceive. The revelation of God from Mount Sinai, "I am the Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God", is repeated in 2 Chronicles 30, in Nehemiah 9, Psalm 86, Psalm 103, Psalm 111, Psalm 145, Joel 2 and Jonah 4. Over and over this sense of mercy combined with favor, with undeserved favor, permeates the language of the Old Testament writers. This is our God. This is how He acts towards the people He has chosen for His own.

And you hear the plea of the psalmists and the prophets for God to continue to be gracious towards His people. An example comes from Isaiah 33:

*O Yahweh, be gracious to us; we long for You
Be our strength every morning, our salvation in time of distress.*

And, after exposing the sins of the priests, the prophet Malachi says to them:

Now implore God to be gracious to us.

The sense in so many of these passages is one of mercy, of forgiveness for blatant sin, obvious defiance of God's commandments. When people said that Jesus' speech was gracious, they were hearing the compassion of God for their brokenness. They were hearing the mercy that God is willing to extend to people who will humble themselves. Gracious speech is not powerful rhetoric, it's not sleazy lies and political promises, it's not the demanding nature of law or the passion of the upright -- it comes with kindness, with insight into the reality people live with and with the hope that things can get better -- and they really did get better when Jesus started His ministry.

Now, to the other gospel, the gospel of John, the first chapter. John's gospel opens with a powerful theological statement about who Jesus is:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made ...
and the passage goes on from there and we'll pick it up again in verse 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.

Jesus, the Creator, the Word who was from the beginning, had come to earth, from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Now, verses 16 and 17:

From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the

Father's side, has made Him known.

In the space of four verses, the word grace is used three times to describe Jesus in a way that you would have to say summarizes His ministry. Jesus came to us from the Father and, in His coming, brought grace and truth -- those two words are linked together twice in this passage. The other use of grace is also worth noting: "From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another." This is John's reflection on the impact that Jesus had on his life, and on the life of all who knew Him, or, in his own words in verse 12, all who received Him. One blessing after another came from the fullness of grace that marked the life and ministry of Jesus.

What did that look like? Didn't Jesus speak rather harshly to the religious leaders of His day? Didn't He have strong words calling for radical commitment to the people who came to hear Him speak and to receive His miracles of healing? Yes and yes, but there are also many examples of the kind of gracious actions, the kind of loving and including and blessing actions, that can only be defined by grace. Let's look at a couple of examples of Jesus actually dealing with people. I'll take one from Luke and one from John.

Luke tells us about Zaccheus, a tax-collector, collaborator with the occupying Roman armies, hated by any Jew who loved freedom and was praying that God would deliver His people yet again. "Deliver us, Lord, and rid the land of scum like Zaccheus who rob us to serve Rome and self." Zaccheus was hated . . . and despised as a man of no good character, no redeeming quality. He was regarded as a traitor and a cheat and an enemy. But notice how Jesus talks to this man -- first, when He finds the little man up in a tree:

Zaccheus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.

And that got the murmurs going -- "He's going to be the guest of a 'sinner'". But Jesus doesn't let up in his pursuit of Zaccheus just because the crowd doesn't approve. And when Zaccheus offers to repay those he's cheated with 4 times the amount and to give half his money to the poor, Jesus says this:

Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

Notice how Jesus identifies Zaccheus -- not as a cheat and fraud and selfish dude with serious character issues. He identifies him as a child of Abraham and as a man who was lost. "You belong," Jesus was saying to him. "You're one of the chosen people, descended from your father, Abraham. You've lost your way, you've lost what it means to be a man of faith and you've lost your sense of belonging to the community of God's people, but that's okay because I'm here to help lost people find their way. I'm here to seek and to save people like you, Zaccheus."

Here's a principle for how to live graciously. You don't act as if you're the judge, you're the one who has to tell others what's wrong with them, but you look for even the smallest thing to encourage and you fan that into flame. What good news did Jesus have for Zaccheus? "You're part of the family. Today salvation has come to this

house!” There are times when you have to look real hard, but there’s always something there, something to encourage, something to build on, some reason for hope.

Listen to this prophecy from Isaiah 42 about what Jesus would be like and you see it illustrated in this story of Zaccheus:

Look at My servant, whom I strengthen. He is My chosen One, and I am pleased with him. I have put My Spirit upon him . . . He will be gentle -- He will not shout or raise his voice in public. He will not crush those who are weak or quench the smallest hope. He will bring full justice to all who have been wronged.

Think about how Jesus promotes justice and how the world tries to bring it about. American prisons are full of people who have trafficked in illegal drugs -- they are far and away the world leaders in putting people in jail. They have special sources of funding for local police units who can break up drug rings, while funding for other crimes is dramatically reduced in many cities.

Then look at how Jesus brought about justice for those who had been oppressed by Zaccheus and his abuse of the Roman tax system. He reached the man’s heart, made him feel accepted, significant, and that man quickly made the commitment to restore what he had taken and even go beyond simple restoration. Jesus does it with grace and with gentleness, refusing to crush the weak or to quench the smallest hope of the discouraged. You could say that Zaccheus fit into those categories -- after all, nobody liked him. He was wealthy, for sure, but who could he share that wealth with? Nobody would come over to the house of a sinner . . . until Jesus did.

The second story is from John 8 and there we find Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem early in the morning and soon a crowd gathers around Him to hear Him teach. We don’t need to be reminded that Jesus had enemies who were forever looking for a way to trap Him, to make Him look bad in the eyes of the people who flocked to hear Him.

So into this setting of Jesus teaching a crowd of people in the temple, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees came dragging a woman who had been caught in the very act of committing adultery. No man was brought to trial that day, which says something of the double standards of the times.

“Teacher,” they said to Jesus, “this woman was caught in the very act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?” They were trying to trap Him into saying something they could use against Him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with His finger. They kept demanding an answer, so He stood up again and said, “All right, stone her. But let those who have never sinned throw the first stones!” Then He stooped down again and wrote in the dust. When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. Then Jesus stood up again and said to her, “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” “No, Lord,” she said.

And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

Now, there are several ways to look at the situation that is described in this story. One way is to say that a law was broken and that if you want people to have respect for the law, you have to make sure that the consequences that are set forth for breaking the law are upheld. If Jesus just says, "Let her go," then the teachers of the law can say that He has no respect for the law of Moses. But there is another way of looking at this situation and that is to observe that there is hypocrisy here -- no man is brought before Jesus, even though there was one involved in the law-breaking. There are doubtless some among the accusers who have sinned in this area of sexual morality and yet they stand ready to punish this woman.

Will Jesus condone their hypocrisy by condemning this woman? No -- His response confronts that hypocrisy by asking the accusers to declare themselves sinless before they take on the role of executioner -- and they can't do that. They have to admit that they are also guilty and they walk away.

Jesus had to make a decision based on law or mercy and He chose mercy. He again fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, "He will not crush those who are weak or quench the smallest hope."

In both these stories we see grace at work. We see why John would conclude that "from the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another." Jesus' authority came from who He was, as the Son of God, but also from the fact that He lived a blameless life. He was perfect. But He didn't throw that in people's faces and demand that they be perfect before they could experience His love. Instead, He spoke with gracious words, He did gracious deeds of forgiveness and healing and He demonstrated that God is, in fact, exactly what He said He was in the Old Testament, a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. Jesus showed this face of God towards the people He met and they were amazed at the gracious words that came from His lips and they saw the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

So, what can we learn from Jesus' example and how do we live graciously in an ungracious world?

1. We can learn to look for sparks to fan into flame and for hope that needs to be refreshed and encouraged. We live in an age of critics and if you doubt that, think about why radio has switched from music to talk shows. Because people want to express their point of view and much of it is negative, critical, destructive. Not unexpectedly a lot of the nearly anonymous feedback on a variety of websites is also critical, sometimes harshly so. Parents will speak life to their children, but who else will along the way? Coaches, teachers, family friends . . . maybe, but some of them can take the wind out of a person's sails too. So, look for the dimly burning wick, or the person who is weak and, instead of telling them how weak they are, act and speak in ways that build and encourage and strengthen and give hope and life.

2. How, then do we confront sinful behaviour? How do you go to someone who probably feels weak and maybe even unworthy, and tell them that there's something that needs to change in their life? How did Jesus do it? After seeing the woman caught in adultery released without penalty, He told her, "Go and sin no more." To the man He healed by the Pool of Bethesda -- the story is told in John 5 -- He said, "Stop sinning, or something worse may happen to you." He extended great grace to people, showed them that He loved them, then told them how to live in a positive, life-saving way. Patti and I have, for many years, tried to follow this example, this principle for ministry that we see in Jesus' life. Maybe it's a version of, "Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care," but we try to extend grace and, with that grace, to speak into people's lives words that we trust will bring life, hope, peace with God and with others. None of us can make choices for others, but we can encourage good choices. When you've given your best shot by speaking the truth in love, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:15, then you can only pray and trust that, sooner or later, people will choose to respond to love and to grace.