

THE GRACE OF GOD

July 11, 2010

Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

How can we ever comprehend the grace of God when so much of what is written in the Bible gives us the impression that God only rewards those who earn and deserve God's favor? For example, take a look at our first reading for today. Basically the author is saying, "When you obey God and observe all of God's commandments and decrees, then God will make you abundantly prosperous in all of your undertakings." From this statement, we can understand how some people might come to the conclusion that if I am prosperous in this life, then I must be doing something right to please God and give God such delight. Given this conclusion, some people also assume that those who are not doing well in this life probably have done something to displease or offend God, and are deserving of their impoverished state or poor health.

Nothing could be farther from the truth, at least the truth about the good news of God's realm and about the grace of God that is exemplified by the forgiveness of sins, not the punishment of sinners. Most people prosper in this life, not because they have observed every commandment and decree of God, but rather because they know how to work and play the system to their own benefit and advantage and bear the fruit of their efforts. In God's realm, such efforts are of no consequence, because in God's realm we all are loved equally by God, we all are forgiven the same by God, and all of us already are saved by God. There is absolutely nothing that we can do to deserve any of these gifts, but there is everything that we can do to respond to these gifts of grace with gratitude and good will toward all.

However, Jesus also adds to the confusion of this relationship and dynamic when he responds to the lawyer who wants to know what he must do to inherit or merit eternal life. When the lawyer answers that he must obey the law, love God with his entire being, and love his neighbor as himself in order to inherit eternal life, Jesus affirms his answer as being the right answer and indicates that, as a result, he will live eternally in God's good grace. Why couldn't Jesus have said to the lawyer that he didn't have to do a darn thing in order to inherit eternal life? Where is the grace of God in Jesus' response? According to what Jesus has told this lawyer, we are left with the distinct impression that we can earn God's reward of eternal life by obeying the letter of the law, loving God with our entire being, and loving our neighbor just as we love ourselves.

Is there any possibility that Jesus is setting this lawyer up for some disappointment and failure? If eternal life is completely dependent upon the lawyer's total compliance with the law of God, then the minute that this lawyer disobeys any one of God's commandments, fails to love God above everyone and everything else in his life, or fails to love his neighbor as he has been loved by God, the promise of eternal life is taken away from him, and is gone forevermore. Where is the grace of God in this equation—an equation that is all too common in our own psyche whenever we wonder or perhaps even worry about whether or not we have done enough good works to get into heaven after we die? Thankfully, the Apostle Paul takes away any doubt about our final destination when he indicates that the bottom line for all of us is God's forgiveness of sins up to and including the moment that we die, just as Jesus forgave all of us at the moment of his death on the cross.

This same attitude is reflected in the parable that Jesus tells the lawyer in response to his question, "Who is my neighbor?" According to Jesus, the lawyer's neighbor could be a Samaritan. Heaven forbid! Samaritans were considered to be heathens. Samaritans were supposed to be evil. Samaritans were known as the enemy. Are these the people that the lawyer is supposed to love? Wow! With an expectation like this one, how could the lawyer ever inherit eternal life?

Yet, such is the extent of God's grace as repeatedly demonstrated by Jesus, who would interact with Samaritans just as he interacted with people of his own nation. As far as Jesus was concerned, Samaritans were not the enemy; they were people to be loved and cared for just like everybody else. More importantly, Samaritans were just as likely to belong to the reign of God as those who assumed that they already belonged as a result of their compliance with the law of God.

In fact, according to this parable, the 2 people who were supposed to be considered saints, the priest and the Levite, are portrayed as quite the opposite. They not only are not neighborly; they are outright offensive in the way that they refuse to help the injured man in order to protect their own lives. For all we know, the injured man could have been one of their parishioners, but their love for themselves takes precedence over their love for any neighbor, and certainly does not reflect the love that God has for all people.

Although Jesus tells this parable in order to make the point that the Samaritan could be the lawyer's neighbor that he is supposed to love, the question that isn't answered in this story is whether or not the priest and the Levite are recipients of God's mercy and forgiveness. According to the letter of the law and the idea that a person has to do something in order to deserve God's forgiveness, the answer is

“No!” However, according to the testimony and witness of Jesus, even the most obnoxious, self-loving sinner is worthy of God’s forgiveness, not as the result of anything that the person does, but solely by virtue of God’s grace.

This grace of God’s forgiveness may not have been so apparent even to those who accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry, but once Jesus forgave those who were responsible for his conviction, persecution, and crucifixion, including his own disciples, the mercy and justice of a loving God became ever more apparent—the same kind of mercy and justice that God desires of us even towards those who are our arch-rivals and worst enemies.

Whenever we engage in this discernment about the extent to which God’s forgiveness is a complete gift of grace as opposed to something that must be earned by the proper amount of contrition and the right form of repentance, we have to remind ourselves that the Apostle Paul, previously known as Saul, was the worst of sinners. Yet, despite his persecution of the early followers of Jesus, Jesus did not hold this sin against him, but rather called him to a new way of life through the baptism with the Holy Spirit. With this baptism, Saul’s former life was forgiven, and he was given a new lease on life to lead a life worthy of Christ, fully pleasing to him and bearing fruit in every good deed. Given this experience, it is no wonder that for Paul the forgiveness of sins is the bottom line in the realm of God.

I doubt that any of us will ever be able to comprehend this grace of God, but we don’t have to do so in order to reap the benefit of such a gift. All that we are asked to do is to accept this gift given so freely without any merit on our part, and then to allow this gift to be our incentive and inspiration to forgive others, even our worst enemies, just as we have been forgiven by God through Jesus, our Christ. Such forgiveness makes no sense, because no one deserves such a free gift, but for this very reason, we all can be grateful that God’s grace is not dependent upon our love for God or our love for our neighbor, whoever our neighbor might be. However, once that we have taken this gift of God’s love to heart, we always are reminded that we are to go and do likewise, and bear the fruit of love for God and for our neighbor in all that we think, say, and do. In this hope, may the grace and peace of God that go beyond all of our human understanding, keep our hearts and our minds ever faithful unto Jesus, our Christ. Amen.