

I don't talk enough about the grace of God. I know that because sometimes I talk about other things. God's grace is the fact and the central concept of the Gospel. God's love for us is complete and absolute; nothing we do or fail to do can deflect, diminish, or weaken it. This news is so good that many people, even many faithful, intelligent, well-formed people, have struggled to believe it.

In Jesus's time, Jewish worship centered on the Temple in Jerusalem. We may love cathedrals, but they aren't as important to us as the Temple was to Jews. A cathedral is the seat of a bishop, but the Temple was the seat of God. And therefore, Jewish priests were required to observe a special set of religious laws in order to be eligible to perform their duties there and these laws were more detailed and arcane than the laws that applied to all Jews.

The Pharisees, a new movement, thought that everyone should follow the special priestly laws. They thought that somehow this would make everyone "priestly." Which might sound appealing, or even noble, at first blush. But there were three problems with this agenda. The first is that if they had succeeded, it would have become impossible to do some things that society really needs to have done, like burying the dead. The second is they assumed that being a priest made someone a better person. I assure you, it has never worked that way. The third was that in pushing this agenda, the Pharisees showed their monumental hubris; they revealed that they believed they knew better than the priests, and the tradition, and the scriptures, and by inference, better than God.

So it's no wonder that Jesus had to call them out. The Pharisees had numbers and institutional power on their side, but Jesus had to stand his ground and stare them down. What they were pushing wasn't just misguided, it was dangerous, and in a perfect world, Jesus's statement would have extinguished their error and the burden it imposes on faithful people. But Christians have often tried to replace the grace of God with a list of rules, sometimes, in a cruel irony, using Jesus's own words to support their agenda.

The biggest proponent was a monk named Pelagius. He started out with a set of denials of the reality of sin that sounded very appealing, but they carried through to appalling logical consequences. On the one hand, Pelagius denied that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ brought any benefit to humanity: no forgiveness. On the other, he claimed that every human being could lead a perfectly sinless life if they just try hard enough. Since we can, he said, it is God's requirement. That's a hellacious burden to lay on anyone, manifestly unfair and patently intolerable. In theological terms, it makes God a cruel and disingenuous monster, setting an impossibly high standard and then punishing those who can't meet it — which is everyone. Yet because he made Christianity into something concrete, familiar, and simple, his teachings were quite popular.

Today most people don't know the name Pelagius, but we don't have to look far

to find people desperately in need of the grace of God and the true security its assurance provides. Without accepting God's grace, we tend to grasp for any scheme that promises security or allows our most primitive impulses to rule us. Plenty of people will play on these tendencies, amassing power for themselves, driving us further from the source of all love, all while telling us they have our best interests at heart. Others try to mix a bit of legalism into the Gospel, making grace conditional, and therefore *not grace*.

Jesus showed that God loves us too much to be picky or pedantic. He revealed how much God loves us, and what excellent things God intends for us. He taught and showed us that God's grace is bigger, better, stronger, and more desirable than anything we could invent, and he reminded us that only God has the authority to determine how these things work. Then James, as he tended to do, wrote about how to apply these teachings in our own lives.

James talks about how we might live after we accept God's grace, what it means to be a "doer of the Word." He understood that Jesus isn't trying to replace one onerous burden with another, he is setting us free and giving us a challenge that will make us stronger. As such, James talks more about a new way of life than a laundry list of concrete do's and don't's: "be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls."

Caring for those in need is a quintessential feature of the Christian life, but we tend to forget that we are also called to give up selfish anger and entitlement. Not only because they harm the community, but also because they deny grace. That is, how can we claim entitlement over the gifts of God, which we understand and acknowledge as given without regard to our merit? Rather than take on a *burden* that will crush us, and do nothing to help us or the world, the life of grace offers a *challenge* that will lead us to grow, make us stronger, and share God's gifts to bless the world. The challenge is to meet every situation, every opposition, with grace.

Grace does not necessarily mean giving in, doing what someone else wants. Sometimes it even lets you maintain control. When new people come to bible study, even if they seem to have a less than gracious attitude, we welcome them. When they claim that a longtime member who has always brought her well-behaved dog is inappropriate for doing so, we explain that our church is welcoming and inclusive. When they say they're allergic to the dog, we offer them a Sudafed. When they say dogs don't belong in church, we ask them if they've ever been to a blessing of the animals service, which is a highlight of the liturgical year. And when they decide to leave, we respect that decision.

Sometimes grace means indulging the needs of the world. Other times it means being better than the world's challenges, standing up without escalating, being stainless steel against the world's rusted iron. Jesus did not promise that following him would

make our lives easier; if anything, quite the opposite. But grace gives us a more enduring peace than human measures of merit or our own feelings ever could.

If we choose to follow Jesus as closely as we can, with ardent, singleminded devotion, we begin to take after him. Being immersed in his grace tends to make us more gracious ourselves. He did promise to change us, and to be with us, always. So we receive his grace, and it operates within us like a planted seed, causing us to grow in wisdom and compassion, strengthening our identity and uniting us with Christ. Then, more and more, his grace operates in the world through us, sometimes in unpredictable ways, always better than anything we could invent.