

June 17/18, 2006

Father's Day Weekend

Grace at Home

Luke 15:11-32

Pastor Bryan Clark

Several years ago Gordon MacDonald wrote these words, "The world can do almost anything as well or better than the church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do It cannot offer grace."

- from *What's So Amazing About Grace?* by Philip D. Yancey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 15.

The one thing that distinguishes Christianity from every other world religion is this wonderful concept of grace. I grew up in the fundamentalist movement, and there was a lot of talk about grace. But I wouldn't say we experienced much grace in reality. Grace is one of those things that is easy to talk about but oftentimes just doesn't seem to make its way into the everyday stuff of life.

David Seamands was a well-known Christian counselor. He summed up his career this way:

Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness, and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness and grace to other people... We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not the way we live. The good news of the Gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions.

- from *What's So Amazing About Grace?* by Philip D. Yancey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 15.

I would say that I agree with that statement 100 percent. I understand my role as a father is to properly represent God to my children. One of my roles is to be the primary disciplinarian. In that role it is very important that I teach my children by modeling a theology of grace. But that is hard. What does that look like? What does grace look like at home?

If you have a Bible with you this morning, turn with me to Luke 15. Whether you are a parent, grandparent, or any other relationship, these truths apply. So certainly the application isn't limited to fathers. Really to understand what grace looks like at home, we first have to understand: What does it look like from God to us? I have to understand that part of it if I am ever going to model it at home.

That's really what this text is about. It is often referred to as "the prodigal son" but that is really misnamed. The point of the story is not the son; the point of the story is the father. It is the parable of the gracious father.

To understand the context we look at verses 1 and 2:

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:1-2, *NASB)

So Jesus tells this story in response to the religious leaders' complaint that He received and ate with sinners. We begin in verse 11:

And He said, "A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with

loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.” (Luke 15:11-16)

One of the things that is worth noting here is the fact that this son was rebelling against a very loving, compassionate, gracious father. The father that raised him was the father that receives him back. I want to make sure that it is clearly understood I am not implying that if you do everything right as a parent, your children will always turn out right. Nor am I saying that if your children rebel it is because you were a bad or ungracious parent. I am just saying that we need to do the best that we can, and then certainly the odds are in our favor that our children will walk with God.

The young son wanted his inheritance. It would have been one-third of his dad’s estate. The older son would get two-thirds, and the younger son one-third. Jesus goes out of His way in the telling of this story to make the son’s behavior as offensive as it could possibly be. He gets his estate; he takes it out and goes to another country. He leaves the land of Israel and dwells among the Gentiles. That would have been very offensive. He doesn’t just lose this money; he squanders it with loose living. In verse 14, he repeats that **“he had spent everything.”** In came the famine, and he went and “hired himself”—that means he “glued himself.” He became a slave to a Gentile, feeding pigs in order to survive. Everything about that would have been just as disgusting as it possibly could be to this Jewish audience. So understand Jesus is painting a worst-case scenario here.

Verse 17:

“But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.’ ” (Luke 15:17-19)

The son’s response clearly shows there is a level of brokenness when he comes to his senses—we might say today when he finally hit bottom—and realized, *This is really stupid; something has to change*. There is a sense of repentance, a sense of confession there that is really important. He determines that he could go back and, even though he has forfeited his right as a son, he could be his father’s slave and he would still be living better than he is living.

I am guessing that this religious audience, upon hearing this, were shaking their heads saying, “Yeah, I think that would be fair. I think that would be right.” As a matter of fact, if the father was somewhat gracious he would receive that plan of the son. You see, this is sometimes where we get into trouble. We mistake fairness for grace. This probably was a fair arrangement, but the father is going to go far beyond that.

“So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of

mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate.” (vs. 20-24)

The son heads home, and as soon as the father sees him coming over the hill, the father does something that was actually very socially incorrect. As a matter of fact, it would have really shocked the listeners. A respectable, honorable father, especially one with such wealth, would simply sit back and wait for the son. It would be up to the son to come in a very honorable, respectful manner, and then the father would determine whether he would receive the son or not.

It was unheard of that a father like this would take off running towards the son. But the father isn't really interested in what is socially correct. His heart is filled with love and compassion for his son. So he runs to him and he embraces him. Now at this point, he doesn't know the son's intentions. For all he knows, the son is coming back for more. But he loved his son, and that was what was in his heart.

The son begins to deliver a well-prepared speech, as planned. The father hears enough to know his son is repentant and that is all he has to hear. He wants the finest robe on his son, he wants a ring on his finger, he wants sandals on his feet, he wants to kill the fatted calf, and he wants to have a party—because his son was lost and now he has come home.

There is something about this story that just doesn't seem right. Imagine this in a modern day context. This son has wasted what it took his father a lifetime to accumulate. He has lived in every disgusting way possible; he has broken his father's heart. Now he is coming back and you are the neighbor. What you see is the father throwing a party. There is something in you that says, "No, that is not right!" Maybe he needs to go to his room and think about it for awhile. Maybe that is a good arrangement; maybe he needs to be a slave for awhile to see if he really is repentant. The punishment needs to fit the crime. There needs to be consequences for choices. He is going to enable his son because it seems like he is rewarding his foolish behavior. There is something about it that just doesn't feel right. As a matter of fact, if you were a neighbor and you were invited, you may very well choose not to attend the party: *I just can't be a party to this strange behavior.*

It isn't fair. It isn't just. It's this almost reckless, scandalous thing we call grace.

Before we push back too hard on what the father is doing, let's remember this is actually a picture of how God responds when we finally come home. We rebel against God's gracious love, we do our own thing, we live our lives our own way, we kind of thumb our nose at God and we hit bottom. We recognize it, we confess it, and we begin to crawl back toward God, convinced that God must be disgusted with us. In ways we can't even begin to comprehend, God doesn't sit back and wait. He runs and He meets us and He embraces us and He says, "Welcome home! Let's have a party!"

God didn't treat us according to our offenses. God wants to celebrate because we were lost and we've come home. It is a beautiful picture of God's amazing grace to us. That is exactly the grace that He wants our children to experience from us as parents. We have to let go of this notion that parenting always has to be fair and just, that the punishment always has to fit the crime. That's not how God parents us.

Over the years, one thing I have learned is whenever you give out this scandalous grace, there will always be an older brother who doesn't like it.

“Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began

inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.’ ” (vs. 25-32)

You know, the sad reality is I don’t have trouble tracking with the older brother—he makes sense. As a matter of fact, if I would have been there listening to the conversation, I would have been saying, “That’s a good point. That’s another good point. Yes, you seem to be right.” In our sense of what is fair and just, he was right on track. I probably would have concluded, “You know, that makes sense, I think the dad threw the party for the wrong son.”

Frankly, the older brother makes perfect sense if the operating system is a performance based system of the law—because that is always about what is fair and just. We throw a party for those who perform the best. We never throw a party for those who perform the worst. You see, the law is all about celebrating performance. But grace is all about celebrating *people*. I love what the father said in verse 32: “We had to celebrate because he was lost and now he has been found. We had to celebrate and rejoice!”

I think as parents we have a great theology of grace as it relates to our salvation. But for some odd reason, we often operate with a system of law in our parenting. That never becomes more evident than when we get in a crisis situation. We feel at that moment we must “lay down the law”—as if when push comes to shove, there is more power in the law to change a heart than in the power of grace.

You know, in the moment, grace seems careless. It seems reckless. But the New Testament is clear that the law has no power to change a heart at all. No level of rules and regulations can ever change a person’s heart. That is the whole basis of our theology. Why would that be different in parenting? What changes hearts is the grace of God mediated out to the parents at home. But what does that really look like? What we are given in this story is an extreme case, but what does it look like in the everyday stuff of parenting?

I think there are a couple of things we can think about that will help us with this. First, I think it is very important as parents that we define: What does the finished product look like? I am amazed at how many parents just parent their children with the law but never define: What do I want this to look like when my child walks out of my home?

I have tried to be very clear to my children what *doesn’t* make my list of priorities. I don’t care if they are in a popular group at school. I don’t care if they are the prom queen or the homecoming queen. I don’t even really care if they are on an athletic team that wins the state championship. If those things happen, they are fine; I will celebrate with them. But they are not on my list.

I want to make sure my children know what *is* on my list. At the top of my list I want them to have a passionate, dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ. What I need to see before they leave my home is that they own that to the extent that they are responsible for their own spiritual growth. It is no

longer something I am having to push along. It is theirs; they own it; they believe in it. When they walk out of my home they are going to pursue God as one would pursue a lover.

I need to think of my parenting in terms of *process*. I define the finished product and then I work my way back all the way to where I am today and say, “What is it going to take to get from here to there?” You know, there is an interesting thing about parenting. We hear a lot about how important those early formative years are, and I believe that they are. But I also understand that when my kids are little they are incredibly resilient. I can make a lot of mistakes as a parent and my kids just keep coming back. They are like a dog—you discipline them and five minutes later they are right back, wagging their tails. But as your kids get older, they lose that resiliency. The cost of parental mistakes gets higher and higher and higher. You could probably get away with parenting under the law when your kids are little. But the older your kids get, the higher the price tag.

Not only do I want my kids to walk out the door with a passionate love for Jesus, I want them to be governed by their own rules and convictions rather than rules I impose on them. As a matter of fact, I think a worthy goal is by their senior year I don’t have any more rules. It doesn’t mean their behavior is flawless; it means they are now governed by their own conscience, their own sense of what is right and wrong. Now if they can’t handle that, I need to figure out where the problem is and try to help them. But frankly, the day they step out of my door, that’s exactly what is going to govern their behavior. I want to know they can do that, or they are going to go to college and crash and burn.

If you find that as your children get older you are having to use more and more rules, you need to know you are in trouble. That doesn’t mean it is your fault or you did anything wrong. You need to know you are in trouble because pretty quickly there is going to come the day when you are not there to implement the rules and it is going the wrong way.

I want my kids trained and prepared to face the reality of living in a Godless world. So I have defined what I would understand to be success, and then I back it up and think, *What is it going to take to get from here to there?*

I remember when our oldest, Ashley, turned 9, it dawned on me, *I am over half done here*. I suddenly realized, *I don’t have a day to waste; this is going way too fast*.

When we are processing what it is going to take to get our kids from where they are to where they need to be, what you really have to stop and think about is, *Do I think that is going to happen through the power of the law or through the power of grace?* The New Testament is clear that the power of the law has no ability to change the hearts of my children. So why do I parent that way? It needs to be according to the power of grace, because we know firsthand that is life changing. The power of the law is what is just and fair; the punishment has to fit the crime. Grace isn’t like that. Grace is about the person and what is most likely to cultivate a right heart for God.

Years ago when Ashley was in high school, I don’t remember exactly how old she was, but she had her license. Ashley was a very responsible teenager. But on this particular occasion she was in town, it was a week night, she was at a youth group function, and when it was time for her to be home she wasn’t home. Patti was getting a little bit concerned about this. I was saying, “You know, honey, let’s just take a deep breath and give it a little time here.” (You can picture the conversation.) But it got later and later. We called her cell phone: no answer. Well, we are always concerned about the 17-mile drive through the country—they could get in an accident, they could hit a deer. Ashley wasn’t normally late, and she always had her cell phone on. It finally got late enough that we determined something had to be wrong, so we got in the car and headed for town.

Of course, your mind is already going to the worst-case scenario. You are expecting to go up over a hill and see the red flashing lights...there has been an accident or a car upside-down in a ditch somewhere. You know, you are kind of in that frame of mind. We got probably about two-thirds of the way into town and we passed Ashley coming home. Now, you would have to ask her what went through her mind at that moment. I am guessing it was a little bit of an “Uh, oh!” So we turned around and came home.

In that moment there is clearly a sense of relief, but those emotions of relief often turn to other emotions that aren't terribly productive in those moments. So when we turned into the driveway, I said to Patti, “Honey, you are pretty wound up right now.” And I thought, *I don't think that is going to be a productive conversation.* “Would you just let me talk to Ashley?” She said, “Fine.” So we sat down and I said, “Where were you?” She said she was at youth group and afterwards she had a couple of friends that were going through some really hard things, and they were talking about it and she didn't realize her phone was off. They just lost track of time and it got really late, and suddenly she realized that and she came home.

In that moment, all I needed to see in her eyes was a recognition that that behavior was unacceptable. I explained to her, “Honey, you are growing up and you have more freedom, but with that comes responsibility. That is not acceptable. You have got to do better.” The look in her eyes said, “Dad, I understand that and it won't happen again.” The whole conversation took less than five minutes. I gave her a hug and told her I loved her and we went to bed—kind of a non-event.

Two or three days later, Ashley said, “Dad, my friends are blown away that I am not grounded.” I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “Every one of my friends said they would have been grounded if they did something like that.” I remember saying to her, “Ashley, the only thing that mattered that night, when I looked into your eyes, was that I wanted you to understand this is not acceptable; it can't happen again. When I saw that in your eyes, that's all I needed. End of story.” Was that just? Did the punishment fit the crime? Probably not. But it never happened again.

There have been lots of times in raising our girls where they received grace instead of punishment. Some of the times they probably knew that, and some of the times they probably didn't. If you are having a problem with that, I suggest maybe you look in the mirror and remind yourself of how God parents you every day. You see, if you are going to parent according to grace, the focus has got to be on the positive, not the negative. That goes against how we are wired. If you are in business, 99 times in a row you give your customers great service and not a word is said. One time you mess up and they are quickly verbal. Our nature is to be quiet about the positive and verbal about the negative.

We can be that way in our marriage. All we are seeing is the negative and we lose sight of the positive. We definitely become that way about our children. We are constantly focusing on the negative and we lose sight of the positive. We don't tend to verbalize the positive; we tend to be pretty quick to verbalize the negative. God doesn't do that to us! Are you aware of the fact that you probably offended God 100 different ways yesterday? Do you know what God did yesterday? He danced over you, He sang over you, He celebrated over you, He threw a party over you! I think you know this, but in case you don't, I'll remind you that wasn't because you performed so well yesterday. That's just God's grace.

Negative will do very little to change lives. Positive changes a life dramatically. One thing I have noticed over the years: If your focus on the positive most of the time, eventually it does away with the negative. If you are clear on what the end product looks like, then you need to be looking for anything that even hints in that direction and celebrate it. Verbalize it; affirm it. As a matter of

fact, back when I was in youth ministry, I applied this to some teenagers that were in pretty bad shape. Instead of focusing on the negative, celebrate the positive, and you would be amazed at what changes take place.

I also know that I can't figure out everything at once. I need to figure out, I have this much time and this is my greatest concern and work my way through one thing at a time. I have learned with my horse that if I try to fix everything at once, I usually end up with a lot of frustration and me on the ground! It is a process of celebrating the positive, and over time the positive diminishes the negative.

Does that mean we never discipline our children? Of course not! God disciplines us—Hebrews 12. God disciplines us as a form of correction. But does God's discipline define His relationship with us? No more than discipline should define your relationship with your children. The overwhelming majority of the time it should be a celebration—because that is how God parents us.

I want to close with a letter that a teenage boy wrote to his parents after he left home. He said,

Dear Folks, thank you for everything, but I am going to Chicago to try and start some kind of new life.

You asked me why I did those things when I gave you so much trouble, and the answer is easy for me to give you, but I am wondering if you will understand.

Remember when I was about six or seven and I used to want you to just listen to me? I remember all the nice things you gave me for Christmas and my birthday, and I was really happy with the things—about a week, at the time I got the things—but the rest of the time during the year I didn't want presents. I just wanted all the time for you to listen to me like I was somebody who felt things too, because I remember even when I was young I felt things. But you said you were too busy.

Mom, you are a wonderful cook, and you have everything so clean and you were tired so much from doing all those things that made you busy; but, you know something, Mom? I would have liked crackers and peanut butter just as well if you would have only sat down with me awhile during the day and said to me, "Tell me about it so I can maybe help you understand."

...I think that all the kids who are doing so many things that grown-ups are tearing out their hair worrying about are really looking for somebody that will have time to listen a few minutes and who really will treat them as they would a grown up who might be useful to them, you know—polite to them. If you folks had ever said to me, "Pardon me," when you interrupted me, I'd have dropped dead.

If anybody asks you where I am, tell them I have gone looking for somebody with time because I've got a lot of things I want to talk to them about.

Love to all, Your Son.

-from the *Pennsylvania State Law Enforcement Journal* as quoted in Robert Raines, *Creative Brooding*, Macmillan, 1966 as quoted on p.85-86 in *The Effective Father* by Gordon MacDonald (Wheaton: Living Books, 1983).

He said he went looking for time. I think he probably went looking for grace—because deep inside everyone longs to find grace at home.

Our Father, we are thankful that You are such a gracious Father. You don't treat us fairly. You don't treat us according to justice. You lavish on us this scandalous grace. Lord, help us parents to understand there is no power in the law to change lives, but ultimately lives are changed through this scandalous grace of Jesus. Teach us what it means to demonstrate and model this grace at home. In Jesus' name, Amen.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2006 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.