

FULLNESS OF GRACE—THE PARABLE OF GRACE

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INTRODUCTION

When I received the request to speak to a conference of apostles, senior pastors and teachers on the fullness of grace, I was confounded. What would I say to people, some of whom have been in ministry before I was born? The huge literature, books and teachings available on the doctrine of grace, not to speak of the controversies that have surrounded it in recent times further compounded my worry. *And the fullness of grace?*

I was therefore led to pray and the Lord opened my eyes to the fact that one of His parables actually provides all that is to be known on the subject. This is why I have titled that parable, the Parable of Grace. Only Luke (15.11-32) records this parable among the gospel writers and is worthy of our serious attention at this consultation and conference.

2. POWER OF PARABLES

First, a general point on parables as a teaching tool. Education experts remind us that people learn better what they can see rather than only hear. According to these studies, learners retain 15% of what they hear but 75% of what they see. Hence, when they both hear and see something the retention levels rise to 90%. Modern television and other video technology have prospered due to this very fact: messages are more effectively conveyed when people hear and see compared to when they hear alone. The Lord Jesus used parables extensively in His teaching in a way that his hearers could not forget many years afterwards that we need to take up this art/technique again....how to use parables to help people in our ministries to learn the great doctrines of the Christian faith. Parables help people to hear and see the object at issue.

3. PARABLE OF GRACE

According to this story, two brothers of the same parents are two of the three main actors in the drama. The younger brother demands of his father his own inheritance while his father was still alive (contrary to established customs) and runs away with it in riotous living.....Afterwards he repents and returns to his father who received him back warmly and even much beyond the younger son's expectations. The elder brother was not ready to forgive neither his brother nor his father for accepting the younger brother back into the family.

Which of these two has divine approval and why?

According to the Lord's parable which is an important teaching on grace, there are seven reasons why the junior brother who was a repentant sinner would enjoy divine approval whereas the senior 'righteous' brother would not.

1. The sinner repented. The righteous brother did not even accept that he was also a sinner by his attitudes to his father and even to his own brother. He refused to even call him brother but his father's son. Lk.13.3, 5; Jn 3.3,5.
2. The younger son appreciated the fundamental nature of his father's relationship to be one of unconditional love, completely different from the status of a servant which the elder brother had reduced himself. Rom 5.8; 8.32-33.
3. The younger brother recognized that nothing in himself was good. All the goodness was in his father and he can only be good by staying at home with him....the senior brother believed that he has always been good. See Is. 64.6
4. Younger son appreciated that he lost his sonship due to his wayward behavior but the father restores him. The focus is on what the father has done not what he had done. For the elder son it was exactly the opposite. Every focus is on what he had done. He believed that his father had done nothing for him. Heb. 4.9-11,16

5. The son discovered how extravagant was the love of his father. The elder son believed his father was very stingy. Ps.23.1; 2 Pet.1.3.
6. The younger son broke the law of inheritance but was still accepted. The elder believed that he kept that law but in actual fact he did not. He was not appreciative of his father's love in willing all that he had left to him. 1 Jn.3.1; Rom.8.31-32.
7. The elder son never asked anything from his father. The younger son had discovered that all that you get from the father is by asking in faith to receive. There is no limit to receiving all that the Father had. Mt.7.7; Jn.16.24.

These are important lessons we all need to re-learn today. Many times we, especially those of us who have been called to leadership positions, behave like the elder son. We refuse to forgive and we make enemies of those who ask us to forgive those we perceived have sinned against us. In this we set ourselves up as sinless and without any faults and behave like the senior brother in this parable. This then introduces us to the next issue which we examine in the next section.

4. Significance of Grace to the 21st century church.

There are many controversies on grace that exist in the 21st century church today. Perhaps the most important one is how to reconcile law with grace. Some Christians have taken polar positions. Some argue that grace is what sets the New Testament apart from the Old Testament believers. Moses brought law but Christ brought grace, they argue. Hence, all laws of God in the OT (as well as all commandments) are done away with. God's people should not live under any commandment. Even some extreme positions assert that once saved, we are forever saved as Christ's death has cancelled all sins—before and after our salvation—because our nature has been transformed by God, we can no longer sin.

This teaching is attractive but unfortunately defective ...because in actual fact, the Lord brought not just grace but GRACE and TRUTH (Jn1.17). Hence, the first Council of Jerusalem to resolve the clash between Judaism and the new Christian faith even among earliest Jewish Christians agreed that: Jewish leaders of the church were not to trouble the new Gentile converts to Christianity with the gamut of moral, ceremonial and social laws God gave to Israel. However, they were *commanded* to abstain from four things: food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, strangled animals and from blood. This underscores the point that grace does not undermine God's moral and social laws (Acts 15.19-20). *The church of God must comply with God's moral commandments as well as the social ones. However, the ceremonial laws were done away with by the new covenant.* (Heb.8.13)

The book of Hebrews makes clear that the old covenant of sacrifice of animals for diverse sins was done away because it did not bring righteousness, or justification, or holy living. Indeed, that Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law and its many ceremonial demands, which none of the Jewish leaders could keep is a consistent teaching of scripture (Acts 15.10).

At the heart of grace is the unconditional love of God for the sinner. Nevertheless, this is not a basis for the growing universalism as set out in Rob Bell's book, which quickly became a best seller in the United States under the title *Love Wins* (2011). This book teaches that God is too loving to throw anyone into hell—whether or not they believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Considering that this came from an evangelical pastor, it deserves a proper reading and response as has been done by Mark Galli, in *God Wins* (2011) as he argues that such universalism falls short of the fullness of the Christian gospel of love. Clearly, we need to reassert this balance between God's love and righteousness –both in the old and new testaments. Yes, we serve a God of love but He is also the consuming

fire who kills a husband and wife because they lied to the Holy Spirit on their church offerings. (Hebrews 12.29, Acts 5. 1-11).

5. Seven Important Implications of Grace for the 21st Century Church

There are seven important implications of grace that we need to examine at a meeting such as this.

First, the gospel of grace is for all peoples, irrespective of their social, racial and cultural backgrounds. Even religious background is not a sufficient ground for anyone not to benefit from this grace (Gal.3.28). On the other hand, what the world is calling non-discrimination, such as sexual orientation, aka, homosexuality and all other kinds of wickedness are sins that must be repented of when the gospel is faithfully presented and accepted.

Second, while the Lord's moral demands on all humanity (articulated in His 10 commandments—the only laws written with the finger of God-Ex.32.16) are sacrosanct, legalism cannot empower the church. The people of God and His ministers are empowered by the message of grace properly understood as the unconditional love of God. We can always come back to our Father to repent all sins and He would accept us back, if we are sincere and genuine about our repentance, like the prodigal son. Notice that the prodigal son never left His Father's house anymore!

Third, grace was promised before the law and under the dispensation of the law. The God of Abraham (and Isaac and Jacob, the name by which God wants to be known in all generations) is a God of grace....as New Testament writers constantly remind us. (Rom.4.13). Before this in the garden of Eden it was by grace the Lord provided coat of skin for Adam and Eve after they failed by eating the forbidden fruit. Gen.3.21).

When Israel had continuously sinned and broken God's commandments and the Lord decided to send them into exile through the hands of plunderers as under the law, He nevertheless promised to give them a new covenant...which to all intents and purposes is the covenant of grace....The focus of this covenant was on the finished work of Christ on the cross....as the full penalty for all our sins...This is followed with the gift of the Holy Spirit who lives in us so we can hear within us God's eternal counsel.(Jer. 31.31-34; Heb. 8.8-12).

Both OT and NT writers agree that this new covenant of grace is based on better promises, a new priesthood and a more excellent ministry. This new covenant makes the old one, which was only a shadow of what is to come, obsolete.

Through this new covenant, Christ is not only our high priest and mediator between us and God, but also we receive:

Salvation...

Justification

Righteousness

Healing

Deliverance from poverty and sin and

Help to overcome all kinds of temptations to sin.... (Is. 53.4-6, 1 Pet.2, 24)

Fourth, grace was never liberty to a post-salvation life of sinning. The Hebrew writer warns us that grace obtained through the new covenant cannot become a license to sin...Heb.10.2. This is because if we sin willfully or deliberately after we have received the truth by His grace there is no more sacrifice for sin....Heb.10.28-31; 12.1-4. Hence we must like those who went before us struggle against sin...with all our might. Heb. 12...5-7...

Fifth, grace is the foundation for believers to live the life of purpose and good works that give glory to their Father in heaven. Mt. 5.16. The author of the book of Hebrews, some think it can only be Barnabas, because he was the son of encouragement, then singles out four key areas for emphasis...

- A. Strive peace with everyone...Heb.12. 14a
- B. Strive for holiness...and especially avoid sexual immorality and greed which makes a person sell his birthright. V.14b, 16...
- C. Avoid messing up our marriage vows and beds...
- D. Continuously worship God with our mouths with songs of praise...
- E. Obey leaders and honor

Other NT writers speak of how grace of God TEACHES us to live holy...1Titus.2.11-12.

Sixth, grace is important in helping us to move towards excellence in Christ. If the Lord has given us all things and made us adopted us as sons of God, seated with Christ in heavenly places, we need to operate at much higher levels than we presently do (Eph.1.20, 2.6-7). Indeed, the whole of creation is waiting for the revelation of God's sons. But the key here is our reciprocal love for God. If we love Christ and His Father in return for all of His great generosity to us, the Father has prepared for us what no eye has seen, hear heard and what has not entered into the heart of man through revelation by His Holy Spirit as we seek and worship Him. 1 Cor.2.9-10.

Finally, for the NT writers, the grace of God was the most important message they preached. Practically all of the Pauline epistles opened with grace and peace being multiplied to the recipients and readers of his letters. Even Peter, John, Jude also follow this pattern (Rom.1.7, 1 Cor.1.3, 2 Cor.1.2, Gal.1.3, Eph.1.2, , Phil.1.2, Col. 1.2, 1 Thess. 1.1, 2 Thess.1.2, 1 Tim. 1.2, 2 Tim. 1.2, Titus 1.4, 1 Pet. 1.2, 2 Pet.1.2, 2 Jn. 1.3, Jude 1.3). The question is why?

We can only hazard an answer based on a close study of the scriptures and pastoral experience. The message of grace was the distinctive new message that Christ brought. It is also a message that makes the Christian gospel Christocentric.... As Christ was preached, as against human tradition or some other doctrines, Christ was exalted... And people came to Him due to His person, His principles as well as the miracles, signs and wonders that attended the disciple's messages...Acts 8.5-6, 11. 19-21, Heb.2.3-4. The 21st century church must refocus Christ. When we do, the Holy Spirit would take over and help to build His church in His mode, not in the mode of our pet doctrines and desires.

Moreover, the message of Christ brought not only grace (unmerited favor and mercy of God) but also peace with God and with man. Hence, the close connection between grace and peace. Peace with God made a person to be at peace with himself and his neighbours including members of his own family. Which pastor has not witnessed how a broken home was brought together because the partners received Christ into their homes and made Him the cornerstone of their marriage and its head? Col. 1.17. Now peace is the most basic of all our needs....without peace, neither prosperity, power nor posterity can be gainfully experienced.

Conclusion:

I would like to note that the father in the parable gave to the younger son, a number of things. One of these was a pair of shoes which established at that time that he was indeed a son again, even though the junior son only wanted to be a servant.

We need to help the church re-focus and re-emphasize this balance between liberty and truth. If any of us falls away, the Lord is ready to receive us but notice that this junior son did not go back on his promise to live for the rest of his life under the instructions of his father.

All that the church of the 21st century needs is in Christ, the God of all grace. We do not seek Him because of what He gives us but because of His good, gracious and generous nature and that of His Father and ours, to whom He betrothed us. This is the essence of the Christian message and should constitute the core of our mission in today's world.