

The Joy of Abounding Grace
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My hope today is that we would all be amazed and encouraged by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. I share this goal with you in contrast to what we often can feel, which is discouragement by our own sin and failures. I don't know about you, but it's so easy for me to notice all the times I come up short of God's expectations of me. I know the things that I'm supposed to do and I don't always do them. And then at other times I the things I do do are against God's way. And when I remember those sins, when I remember falling short, I start feeling guilty and ashamed. Hardly the victorious Christian life, right?

I've noticed this in others, too. On more than one occasion when I talk with people who are approaching their own death, this issue comes up. They say to me, "I wish I would have been a better witness for Jesus to my coworkers; I made so many mistakes as a father, as a husband, Brian. Do you think God is going to be angry with me for coming up short?" I'm struck by a couple of things when I've been at the deathbed of believers. 1) Imminent death can bring remarkable clarity about the things that matter. The things of the earth, the things of little consequence, that we count as important today, aren't important at those moments. Big, eternal things matter at that moment. Life. Death. Faith. Forgiveness. Sins. Judgment. In my experience, these eternal concerns dominate the thoughts of those approaching death. 2) There's tremendous awareness of our sin and failures.

Satan wants it that way. In fact, he doesn't only work to create those feelings of doubt and inadequacies when we are nearly death, but he tries to do that everyday. In the OT book of Zechariah, there's this scene of Satan accusing a servant of God to the Lord. Satan is drawing attention to Joshua's guilt, Joshua's filth. Listen to how he does that and then also listen to God's response (READ Zech. 3).

The first thing that I want you to notice is that Joshua's guilt and filth are real. He really is dirty and stained. He really is impure. Vs. 3 says it plainly, "Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments." And that's true for you and me. Our sins really are filthy; we really are stained. And that really is a problem.

Today, the remedy to fix that problem is to deny the filth; to rationalize it. To pretend it isn't as bad as it looks. And this is true, I believe, not just in an unbelieving world, but even in the church of Jesus Christ. And do you know why I think that's the case? Because it makes people feel bad. People feel bad when they consider and think about their sin. They feel even worse when somebody else (like a preacher) reminds them of it. And, sadly, the church in America and around the world has preachers behind pulpits who care more about the feelings of the people in the pews more than if they are forgiven. And, for some reason, these preachers have forgotten or have never learned that to lift the spirits of the people and to make them

exceedingly glad (to fix their sadness) is not to ignore or gloss over their sin, but to remind them of the Savior.

I remember one of my very first sermons I ever preached; I was back in SD and I preached out of Isaiah 1. It was my first fire and brimstone kind of sermon. You'll know what I mean when you read Isaiah 1 (I wasn't making stuff up; I was just preaching the text). In Isaiah 1, the prophet doesn't pull punches. Israel was sinning against the Lord and Isaiah was just preaching the truth. I preached that passage because it convicted me; I didn't want to be like that and I didn't want that for others. And I remember the pastor I worked with afterwards say to me, "I don't preach those kinds of messages anymore." He went on to share with me how he wanted to focus his messages more on the love and grace of God.

There's something right about that (and we're going to talk more about that in a minute); there's something absolutely right about wanting and needing to share the love of God for sinners found in Jesus, but the strategy to talk about, celebrate, the grace and love of God needs to include the truth of our sinfulness. That's why grace is so amazing; that's why grace is worth singing about. If the answer to my sin is just ignoring and forgetting it, then we really don't need grace. We just need a short memory. The remedy for our filth isn't pretending it's not real; the remedy is lifting high the purifying grace of the Lord Jesus. That's what we see in Zechariah. Look at vs. 4-5 (READ). The angel doesn't say, "Joshua, what sin? What filth? I don't see any! It's not that bad!" No, he says, "Take off those filthy garments. I'm going to purify you, I'm going to sanctify you; I'm going to give you clean clothes and a clean turban for your head." That's the remedy of God; his cleansing power.

But Satan wants to lock you into a prison of guilt, my brothers and sisters. He wants your sins to so dominate your vision that you are left in an guilt-laden, shameful life where there is no joy; I want to shine a spotlight back on the reason why we can have joy even though we do have sin.

Turn with me to Romans 5. There's a temptation to think Paul's discussion starting in vs. 13 is bad news; a bag full of discouragement. I say that because Paul talks a lot about sin and death. He talks a lot about Adam's first sin and how that impacts every human being who's ever lived. But what's interesting to note is the Paul's intent is the exact opposite. He's actually trying to focus on the power of grace found in the life of Jesus. Yes, there's an Adam who sinned and that sin brought death, but there's someone greater and his name is Jesus and he brought life, he brought grace. So, instead of having a pity party for your sins, throw a bash for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's just read this text to get a feel for Paul's words and message (READ Romans 5:13ff).

You can see this oscillation, can't you, between an emphasis or focus on sin, condemnation and judgment and then grace, life and forgiveness? Back and forth Paul goes. Paul's not bashful in talking about and bringing up man's sin problem, is he? In fact, Paul doesn't try to minimize sin at all; he actually tries to make it a bigger problem than we might

imagine. Look at the opening of vs. 20, “Now the law came in to increase the trespass.” What’s he getting at? So, not only does he say the sin of Adam led every human being after him to sin, condemnation and judgment, he actually goes on to say that when the law of God was given to man, it made the sin problem even worse. The law came to supercharge sin, if you will. The law came to say, “Yep, look how bad sin is; look how ugly sin is; sin is so bad that it can even turn the law (something good from God) into an instrument of Satan.

But here’s the good word, the message of grace and forgiveness that should cause every born again believer to rejoice in God: the point of Romans 5 is that at every turn and in every occasion where sin is addressed, the grace of the Lord Jesus to forgive us and to overcome our sinfulness is highlighted more. That’s the point: God’s grace is better; it’s stronger; here’s sin, but look how there’s more grace. Notice how many times that’s brought up.

- vs. 15b ~ “For if many died through one man’s trespass *much more* have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.”
- vs. 17 ~ “If, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, *much more* will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.”
- vs. 20 ~ “Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace *abounded all the more.*”

Do you see the emphasis? There’s always more grace. No matter the consequence, no matter the power, no matter the increase of sin, no matter the feelings of guilt and condemnation, there’s always more grace, there’s always more life, there’s always more forgiveness from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you ever wonder, my dear brothers and sisters, if there is more grace for you? When you break your promise to God (again) do you believe there’s more grace for you? When your vision is dominated by your mistakes, by your failures, by your anger do you believe there’s more grace for you? When it seems you can trace your difficult life to one, big, colossal mistake and you are overcome with regrets and “what ifs”, do you believe that there’s even more grace? When you read your Bibles and see the demands of the law of love and to live a life of sacrifice and notice you don’t, do you believe there’s more grace for you?

That’s the truth I pray you are hearing today. There’s more. That’s why Jesus came, that’s why he died and was raised on the third day to make sure there’s enough grace to save you and to save me. No one is beyond hope; nobody is too far away for Jesus.

Do you *know* it to be true? And do you *feel* it to be true? Those are different. There are some things we know, but we may not feel. First, I want you to know it. Even if you don’t feel it; even if you don’t feel forgiven, you don’t feel cleansed, know it to be true. Count it true, my brother and sisters. Stop listening to your feelings and listen to the word of God. In Hebrews 7, the author is telling us that Jesus is the greatest priest we could ever know. The priests of God’s people would make sacrifice after sacrifice because they weren’t perfect; the sacrifices weren’t

enough. But when Jesus came and offered himself, the perfect sacrifice, he guaranteed our forgiveness. And in Heb. 7:25 we read this about Jesus, "Consequently, he [Jesus] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." Uttermost. It means *completely*; it means *perfectly*. That's how Jesus saves, my dear brothers and sisters. Know it to be true.

Here's what's so cool about God's saving grace: this grace that always more than your sin is given to you whether you feel it or not. I want you to feel it and there's a way you can. But even if you don't feel it, you still get the grace. Do you know? Because Jesus saves by grace through faith and not by how strongly or passionately you're convinced by it. Do you see? The power to be saved, the potency to save, the hope of a successful deliverance is found in the blood of Jesus and not in the strength of your faith. Your hope is found in the strength of Jesus' grip on you and not your grip on him. There's always more grace.

So, what should you do with this news? First, if you would describe yourself as seeking; you wouldn't say you are a Christian, but you're listening: turn to Jesus today and receive his grace for the forgiveness of your sins. Being a Christian means you've heard this message and you believe it in such a way that you'll admit your sins, call out to Jesus for help and then arrange or order your life around him. Do you agree with God that your sins are as ugly as he says they are? Do you agree with God that your sins are your to own and you will be judged and condemned for breaking God's law? Then humble yourself and confess.

Then, after confessing your sin, call out to Jesus to be saved. You've heard he died for your sins; you've heard that he's ready to forgive you. Call to him! Pray to him and say, "Jesus, I need you and receive your gift of grace. Thank you." Along with this call to Jesus comes a life of repentance. Repentance means turning away from the way you ordered your life yourself and turning to Jesus and allowing his words, his teachings and his life to order your new life. That new lifestyle of confessing sin, calling to Jesus and repenting (turning to him) is the life of faith. You do it believing that God is as great and as gracious as we've been talking today.

The second thing I would say is learn the discipline of reminding yourself of your sins so you can focus more on the grace of God. It is right and healthy for us to have an awareness of our sins so we can continually be amazed by the grace of God. Now, I'm aware that it's really easy for us to overemphasize our sins (both our past sins and our current sins) where we descend into discouragement instead of joy for God's grace. Do you know what I mean? When you read Paul's letters in the NT, he makes frequent reference to his sins in the past and his shortcomings in the present. Probably his most poignant reference is in 1 Timothy 1 when he says (vs. 15), "The saying is trustworthy and deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." I'm the foremost sinner; I'm the worst. I'm the first sinner among many. He knows that about himself. And this isn't some vague mention of his sinfulness detached from reality; in the previous verses (vs. 13-14) Paul lists his sins in detail. So, it's not like he has amnesia about his failures before God; they were right in front of his mind.

But listen to what he says next (vs. 16), “But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.” What’s he overcome by? What’s preoccupying his thoughts and mind? It’s not his sin. It’s God’s mercy; it’s God’s grace. It’s the grace of God that saves sinners, even sinners as bad as me, Paul says.

Are you noticing, then, the dance? First, there is an awareness of sin; being cognizant of past mistakes and current struggles. That’s healthy. But you have to get to the gospel. You have to remind yourself that there’s even more grace. That’s the whole point just like in Romans 5; where sin abounds, grace abounds even more.

How do you know if you’re getting to the gospel? How do you figure out if you’re stuck focusing on sin and never get to the grace? Probably the simplest way to figure that out is examine your joy. Do you have joy in the grace of God? Does that enthrall you? Does joy dominate your mind for God’s forgiveness or are you stuck in guilt and shame? That’s the difference between *knowing* it and *feeling* it.

That means there’s a part you have to play; you have a faith step to take. This won’t happen naturally. In fact, if you just sit back in your spiritual lazyboy, chances are you’ll be stuck dwelling on your sin rather than focusing on God’s grace. That’s why the Bible gives us so many commands to remember the Lord Jesus, remember his grace. Take this bread, drink this cup in remembrance of me. Remembering is work; it’s a work of faith. It’s choosing to believe God’s word more than believing Satan’s lies and your own feelings. But, my dear brothers and sisters, that’s why God gives us these glorious words. To lead us to joy; joy that there is always more grace.

Key verse: Romans 5:20 ~ Now the law came to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.

Questions for the week

- What’s the difference between having a healthy awareness of sin and an unhealthy preoccupation with sin? What is the danger of the latter?
- What tempts you to doubt that there’s always more grace?
- How do you evaluate or determine your level of joy in God’s grace? What are superficial indicators and helpful or true indicators?