

Explore the Bible: True Grace

August 21, 2018

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for September 9 focuses on Galatians 2:11-21.*

If we were to ask for a list of the most used words of the Christian faith, “grace” certainly would be on that list. At the same time, if we were to ask what the most misunderstood word of the Christian faith would be, I propose “grace” would be it. *Why is this the case?*

Paul’s defense of the gospel itself (in Galatians 1) was given because it was worth defending. We can say the same for grace, because it is by grace that the gospel can impact lives. Simply put, grace is when a person receives what he or she cannot earn, and that is exactly what Paul will defend here.

Start by asking your group these questions: *What is a clear definition of grace? How have you heard the word “grace” used in normal conversations? Why and how is grace misunderstood among Christians and nonbelievers?* With the diverse answers you receive, perhaps we will all see the need to focus in on this wonderful concept today.

Confronted by Truth (Galatians 2:11-14)

In one breath (verses 1-10) we see Paul affirmed and in cooperation with the apostles, but in the next, we see some confrontation with Peter, one of the main voices of the apostles. *How do we respond when someone is “clearly in the wrong?”* Some confront, but others keep quiet. While Paul’s personality may be in play here, it also is his conviction that led to confrontation.

See if your group could make up a modern-day equivalent to the scenario in 2:11-14. Since we are far removed from the Jewish-Gentile tension, it may be helpful to see this in a modern scenario. We must see the hypocrisy of living one way when noticed, and another when not.

One thing to consider is “self-examination.” Believers need to daily look at their lives to see whether or not they are living in line with grace. We did not earn salvation, so we should not put constraints (like the Jewish Law) on others. In this case, Peter was guilty of needing self-examination. In humility, we should also see our need for the same thing.

Justified by Grace (Galatians 2:15-18)

The word “justified” is used over and over, and this is part of the saving truth of the gospel. When we receive the grace of salvation (we did not earn it), we are given justification (which we also did not earn). In other words, justified means living “just as if I’d never been a sinner.”

This is a call to the freedom Christ gives! It would make no sense for a former slave to go back to slavery, so it also makes no sense for a former “sinner” to go back to a sin-ruled life. And that is Paul’s exact point. If Jesus made us right, do not cheapen grace by going back to the old ways. It makes no sense!

Paul’s question and answer in verse 17 may seem confusing, but be sure to realize this was a “Christ or the Law” struggle. The false evangelists were trying to say Christ promoted sin when justification became primary over following the Jewish Law (L. Ann Jervis, *Galatians*, 70-71).

Crucified with Christ (Galatians

2:19-21)

Here is the crux of his argument for being justified by grace versus justified by the law. The entirety of the Jewish law could not save a person, because it condemned each person as a sinner. Since righteousness could not happen through the law, Jesus died for a purpose, and that purpose was to give a true way to salvation through grace: Jesus paid the price, so we did not earn it.

What do you make of this imagery of being “crucified with Christ?” If you understand the context of crucifixion, Paul is saying that he was shamed, mocked, beaten and murdered alongside Jesus. This does not sound appealing. *Why should we want to be crucified with Christ?*

One thing we often do not make clear about receiving salvation from sin, is we gain a full dependence on Jesus. He calls the shots. It is Jesus living “in me” now, not me doing the living, if we read verse 20 correctly. Our human flesh died on the cross with him, so now our new lives are led by him. *Why is this hard to grasp? What is our greatest challenge here?*

Conclusion

Ask your group: *How many of you have done something for nothing?* For example, perhaps a person has finished a project for work that ended up not being implemented. *How do we feel when our efforts have been spent for no reason?* Now, imagine if Jesus had died for no reason. Imagine he suffered, died and was resurrected, but for no need.

Paul’s biggest issue—and what should be our biggest issue—with cheapening grace is it cheapens Jesus Christ. The worst thing a believer could do is start living in the bondage of the Law when Jesus died to give freedom from the flesh, to experience grace.

Sometimes the prayer before a meal is called "saying grace." *Do we understand why this is the case?* The idea is that we are eating something that we may have cooked, but God provided for us to enjoy. All we need, Jesus paid for. We did not earn or deserve it, but we get to enjoy it. And that is worth defending and living out.

Heath A. Kirkwood is lead pastor of First Baptist Church in Lorena.