

Grace upon Grace
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John 1: 15-18: John testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace.

For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (*American Standard Translation*)

Over the German Concentration Camps was the message "Arbeit Macht Frei" – We freely translate that as "Work sets you free".

We live in a country that endorses that view.

In fact, we live in a country where we have even given it a name: The Protestant Work Ethic. Wikipedia – the online encyclopedia of everything relevant to our lives tells us that:

The **Protestant work ethic**, or sometimes called the **Puritan work ethic**, is a Calvinist value emphasizing the necessity of constant labor in a person's calling as a sign of personal salvation. Protestants beginning with Martin Luther had reconceptualised work as a duty in the world for the benefit of the individual and society as a whole. The Catholic idea of good works was transformed into an obligation to work diligently as a sign of grace.¹

Work is good, and we have added to this ethic the idea that if you follow this model, good things happen to you.

You will be set free – in short ... Work sets you free.

Now in our "work a day" world, I think there is value to that. It is important for us to have a view that at least part of our identity as individuals comes in how we make a contribution to the world around us.

There is clearly, value in that view.

At the same time, it is a view that can make those unable to work, feel less than whole. It may give them the idea that because I can't work, I can't be set free.

I come from a family of hard-workers. My father and his brothers took pride in working for a man, honestly and completely. Loyalty to the company was valued, and when they said they would work for someone, that meant a dedication to that company with every fiber of their existence.

I can hear stories about Red Martin, Marilyn's father, and recognize them as stories about my own father.

Work was important.

But my father had a dark stain in his view: If a person – particularly a white person in the unfairly stacked deck that was the pre-Civil Rights South – if a person was poor and not able to care for his family, then, my father's view was that there was a character flaw in that person.

A low status in life equated to a character flaw in the person – particularly if you were white in the white dominated south. My father had some tolerance to African Americans being poor, because he felt the world was unfairly tilted against them.

But – like so many in his generation – and generations before him, his view was that work set one free. It provided if you will the meaning for how this life was defined.

As I said, there is value in that view – but it is incomplete and we need to look at using God's view.

In our every day – our workaday – world – there are clearly some of us who are not healthy enough to work.

We may have had surgeries.

We may have had strokes.

We may have had accidents.

Part of how Jesus dealt with this was reminding us that lepers were still Children of God and they were not lepers as a result of anything they may have done.

I wonder if we sometimes make people who can't work feel as if they are lepers in this world?

However, my main theme for today is more about Grace – and how God's Grace sets us free – free to live our lives basking in the fact that we are loved, Children of God, freed

from a life of self-loathing that makes us metaphorical lepers in our daily – work a day – lives.

Let's talk for a while about Grace – God's Grace – God's Amazing Grace.

The word we translate as Grace is in Greek a word meaning “gift”.

It is quite literally God's gift to us – extended upon our birth into the world, and relentless offered to us over and over and over again ... in fact – God pursues us in order to offer us this gift.

But – what does the gift look like?

In reality – it is a gift that can look like what we need for it to look like.

The gift is first and foremost an affirmation that we are worthy. There is a sacredness – a specialness in each of us – that is in no one else. We may indeed be lepers in the world, but God has touched us anyway – and in touching us – made us whole to see the world in a different way – if we follow our baptismal example all the way to it's logical conclusion – we die to this world, and come alive to a world where we see things different.

Would that it would be so.

In reality—many of us talk about Grace and how it changes things and then leave to enter a world where we truly believe that Work is what will set us Free.

We aren't following the example of God when we do that.

I can offer to us two specific parables Jesus told that tell us God's Grace operates in a way inconsistent with our values.

How many remember the parable of the farmer who calls people to work in the vineyard?

Anybody want to offer me the story? (Wait).

People show up to work for the owner. They get there early in the morning, later in the morning, early in the afternoon, and a few get there right at quitting time. The people who worked longer expected to be paid more than those who showed up late. Wrong. Rather, the owner – God – paid them the same wages for the whole day.

Not exactly a business plan that would generate a lot of money from the local venture capitalist, but that is not the way God operates.

The Prodigal Son story is a second illustration on the fact that God sees the world in a different fashion than we do.

Boy takes family inheritance, in effect saying “Dad, you are dead, and I want my inheritance while you are still alive” and goes and squanders it. He is welcomed back by the loving father while the older brother sits outside the celebration angry and bothered that his work on behalf of his father is somehow dishonored.

God’s Grace is a challenge to understand in human terms.

It is truly a gift offered to us and a gift that allows to start seeing an opportunity for what it is to be in right relationship with God.

However – and this is important, God operates in a totally different fashion than us. One noted 20th Century Theologian, Karl Barth, reminds us that God is God, and we’re not. God is totally the Other and while we may gain glimpses and insights into who God is, at the end of the day we have to come to the conclusion that God is God, and we aren’t.

John tells us that we have indeed received the fullness of God’s gift – it has been offered to us – and we don’t have to understand it – beyond calling it Amazing – in order to accept it.

God has given us Grace upon Grace – the entire owner’s manual is about God’s Grace – poured out on us – without reservation and for all of us.

Those Broken.

 Those whole.

 Those young.

 Those old.

 Those who have lived a life of terrible activity.

 Those who have had God’s word written on their heart for their entire lives.

Does anybody remember how this passage of John 1 opens?

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God.

For John – and within Christian theology this is important – there is a high degree of unity between God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Word was with God and the Word was God. There was not a time when he was not, and from him comes the gift of the Holy Spirit.

If a primary question that Jesus asks in all three of the synoptic Gospels (ask what that means and which ones they are) is “Who do YOU say I am”.

John gives us the answer to that Question: Jesus is the means by which we start to approach some understanding of who God is. Jesus is in fact the prism by which the light of God is made clear to us – we come to know God.

Has anybody here seen a prism at work?

Glass – you hold it up – light comes into it – often light we can not see – and the light is broken out in such a way as we can discern the violet, indigo, green, red, yellow of the color spectrum.

John doesn't use the word Prism – but for John – Jesus is the human embodiment of what God would look like if we were to be exactly what God calls us to be in the world and he thus gives us this understanding of who we are called to be.

God gives us Grace upon Grace – Jesus on top of the having been set aside by God earlier in the story – David, Sara, Rebecca, Jacob, Abraham and Devorah, and all the other names from the Old Testament – they testify to God's faithfulness to us – God's loving-kindness.

And then, we get a second dose of that Grace – Grace upon Grace – Jesus upon the Old Testament .. and this dose of Grace provides us the opportunity be illuminated, to be set free – and not set free by work, but rather, by taking that next step in the walk with God called "faith".

John Wesley sees Grace as needing to be understood in three dimensions – or said another way – The Threefold Fullness of Grace.

God's Grace sustains us before we know of God's existence – the Grace that goes before us.

God's Grace sets us free from our sins once we use our free will to accept God's offer Gift that is Grace – and that knapsack full of rocks called sin is taken from us. We are free to lead a life freed of worry and guilt and self-criticism.

At that same moment that we accept God's offer of Grace and we are set free – we accept God's offer of holiness – scriptural holiness – set another way – an offer that to be followers of God – as made clear to us through the life and embodiment that is Christ Jesus – we are put on that path leading to perfection.

God's grace is a specific rejection of the idea that it is through work we are set free – we are set free by God's Grace – God's Grace upon Grace –and we are set free to see the world through different – totally different – lenses.

If the leading question in the Synoptic Gospels is Jesus asking the disciples: "Who do you say I am?" – John is clear in his view – Jesus is the means by which we can start to perhaps decipher and understand the fullness of God in the form of his earthly presence, Jesus – the means by which God is explained.

Let us Pray.

Stratmoor Hills UMC

This written sermon as a text was the platform for a sermon delivered more extemporaneously on June 24th, 2007 at Stratmoor Hills UMC, in Colorado Springs.

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¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant_work_ethic