

WHERE DO YOU FIND GRACE?

Well, the last few weeks have been great weeks have been busy with conversation.

We've had brutal cold and Spring-like warmth. There's a comet up in the night sky, and a spy balloon that came down from the sky. There was a terrible earthquake in Turkey, LeBron James took over the spot as the #1 all-time points scorer in the NBA, and Phil the groundhog saw his shadow. All of these things sparked conversation. What were the people you know talking about lately?

If you were with us last Sunday, you might remember that everybody has, or should have, somewhere in their life to connect with people and talk about life, and kids, and work. That place might be over a cup of coffee at a local café. That place might be the break table at work, the school bus stop after the kids leave in the morning, or your mom's house every Sunday afternoon. Where is the place that you regularly connect with other people in caring, casual conversations? Everybody has – or should have – that kind of place somewhere in their life so that we stir God, into the mix of those conversations we are ALREADY having. It's our desire and our prayer that the people we know and love, might come to know and love God just a little bit more, through us.

Last week I threw at you a question for you to answer yourself, and to ask of the people you chatted with this past week. It was, "Who has your faith?" And today I'd like to give you another question that, if you honestly wrestle with it, and if you discuss it with the people you know and love, this question will take you a little bit deeper into their lives. It's a question that, if you wrestle with it, you will come face to face with what God has done in your life. And if you ask it of the people you know and trust, you will help them discover what God has done in their own lives. What's the question? It's this: "Where do you need grace?"

Where in your life and in the lives of the people that you know, could you really use a hand from God? Where in your life and in the

lives of the people you know could you use some forgiveness? Some healing for a past hurt? Some much needed mercy? Where do you, and the people that you know, need grace?

The reason this question is so important is that, whether you know it or not, the people who are in your life, struggle. Everyone struggles. I know, it might come as a shock, you thought you were the only one with a messed-up family, but it's true for everybody. Everybody you know has a heart ache from time to time. Everybody. So where do you, where do the people you connect with, need grace? It's a key question.

The Bible tells us that Jesus when He walked this earth, He had a heart of love and grace, for hurting, struggling, grace-hungry people: ***Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.***

Jesus knew everybody hurts. And He focused in on people's hurts to share with them the grace of God in what He said – preaching and teaching – and what He did – healing. He had compassion on the people because they were ***“harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.”***

And Jesus asked the Christ-followers then, to be the light of the world, that is to be His people who would share God's grace with others: ***Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*** Matthew 9:35-38

Those words were recorded in the Bible, not just to tell us what Jesus DID then. They tell us what Jesus DOES today for believers like you and me. Those words tell us what Jesus does THROUGH YOU to people who are harassed and helpless, hurting, in need of grace.

My friend Joe is a big tall guy, with these glowing blue eyes, and blonde hair. He rides a Harley, and he hangs out with the guys

who operate big construction equipment like backhoes and bulldozers. He is tough, and he is giving and generous to a fault. He is the kind of guy who looks like he has his life all together. Like he's got the magic touch so that he doesn't have one problem in his life. But he doesn't. He's a recovering alcoholic and the first to tell you that.

One night several years ago, we were hanging out together, and he was sharing his life's story. It was the story of a young confused kid, who ran away as a teenager. He got a job at a mining operation out in Wyoming. And out there, young, and alone and far from home, he blew his money on alcohol addiction, drugs, and sex. He went through several failed marriages. When I met him, he had given up on church and he really needed God's healing for his past and help for his addictions. So, I shared with him that what he needed, was found in Jesus. I shared that Jesus loved him and wanted him – something Joe had never known before. I encouraged him to come back to church. I told him no one would judge him. He was welcome.

Somehow -- I don't know how -- God worked through that. And in time God touched his heart. He experienced something he had often heard about, but never had in his life before – God's grace. And he is a new man. Oh, yes, he still is tough. He still rides a Harley. His strained relationship with an ex-wife, and his relationships with his kids who are scattered around the country – I don't envy that. He still has to face down his addictions everyday. But in spite of all that, he has come to know a God who has forgiven all his past in Jesus, a God who accepts him with all of his hurts and heartaches, a God who is working in his life to make him a new man, a God who he is looking forward to spending an eternity with. Joe needed grace. And that grace, he'll tell you, is only in Jesus.

God's grace changes people because, we live in a very graceless world, if you haven't noticed. Think about it – we live in a world where at best you get what you pay for, and sometimes you get *way worse* than you deserve, right? We live in a world where if you want to climb high in your career, no one's going to give you any

favors; instead, you have got to kick some rear-end. We live in a world where if you screw up, you'd better suck it up, and pay the consequences. We live in a world where the hurts and the heartaches that you have are your problem, and yours alone. They're yours to fix. We live in a grace-less world.

To be honest, we use that word – grace – and we throw it around. But we really don't know what grace is in its fullest sense. We will use words like “grace-period” and we mean the extra 15 days you've got before they come and tow your car away. Somehow that doesn't convey the sense of what grace really is.

God's desire is that every person you regularly connect with would come to catch a glimpse of what God's real grace is like, just like Joe did. That's God's desire.

God defines grace in a very particular way. Just so that we're on the same page, we have to discuss what God means when He talks about grace. God defines grace like this: **It's His willingness to give us everything we don't deserve, but desperately need, through Jesus.**

Grace is God's willingness to give us everything we don't deserve – and that's a key part about grace – but desperately need, through Jesus.

One of the greatest grace verses in the Bible is found in 1 John, chapter 4: ***This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*** 1 John 4: 9-11

God says real grace, grace in it's most beautiful, truest, most life-changing form is Him. Real grace is God – sending you His Son to die in your place, for all of your wrongs, your addictions, your inner junk, so you can be forgiven, for no matter what it is, or where you've been, or what you've done, or how you've been hurt. Real grace is God giving you Jesus to hang on a cross, and at the same time giving you a place to hang all of the hurts that will come in your

lifetime. And if that were not enough, Real grace is God giving you hope for a different kind of future – an eternal future with Him in heaven. Just think: God gives an eternal future in the face of temporary heartache. And unlike everything else you know in this world, real grace, is not a trade. It's not a trade. Real grace, grace from God, is a 100%, no strings attached, no down-payment necessary, **GIFT**.

You want to be honest with yourself? You don't deserve it. And neither do I. Yett God in His grace, has looked down from heaven and said, "but you desperately need it. So here it is."

That is how God works. It is not how the world works. That is how God works. It is His heart for you, and for the people in your life. That is grace.

GOD SHOWS HIS GRACE THROUGH YOU

- God wants to show His grace -- through you show His grace -- to the mom that is going through the divorce that she never saw coming. Do you know her?
- God wants to show His grace to your friend whose family ties are all in knots. Do you know them?
- God wants to show His grace to that father of 4, who is so strapped for money, that his high blood pressure rises and falls with each bill that the mail carrier brings. Do you know him?
- God wants to show His real grace – through YOU. Yes, God wants to show His grace to people who desperately need it, **THROUGH YOU**.

How? Keep in mind what we said last week. Sharing Jesus with people you know and care about, is not performing an infomercial. It's not like late night TV – selling knives or folding ladders, or weight-loss programs. Sharing Jesus with people you know and care about, is not arguing or "winning" a battle in which they surrender, and come over to your side.

Sharing Jesus with people you know and care about, is not preaching at them. It's not prescribing a cure like Dr. Phil, and you say, "How's that workin' for ya?"

We said last Sunday that being the light of the world involves listening to the people you know and care about, and then pointing them to Jesus. And I want to ADD to that this week. Add – **being the light of the world is simply to be an imitator of Jesus.** It is making a conscious effort to do to the people in my life what Jesus did to the people in His life when He walked the earth.

Ephesians 5:1-2 in the Bible says: ***Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.***

What does that mean? Jesus gave Himself up for others – for us! He lived the kind of perfect, sinless life we can't and don't live – for you. And He gave Himself up by dying on the cross as the complete payment for your wrongs and sins – He is the ***“fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”***

Jesus gave Himself up, in love, for others. And he asks you to do the same for the people you know and love. Not that you can offer your life as the payment for their wrongs – you can't do that. But instead, as ***“dearly loved children,”*** because of God's great love and grace for you, that made you His -- ***“live a life of love.”***

Be an imitator of Jesus in that way. When surrounded by a crowd of people, Jesus took time for those who were hurting. At your book club or bus stop, wherever it is where you know of people who are hurting, focus your energies on them. Try to share God's unconditional love and compassion, with people who need grace, people whose lives are broken and hurting.

When faced with an opportunity to serve, Jesus always took it, with nothing asked in return. So, I'll try to do the same.

I'll do it not to say, *“look how good I am,”* or *“I sure hope God sees how much I'm serving here”* -- nothing like that. God's gifts are freely given because of what Jesus did. So, having experienced God's love, I'll give and serve *freely*. I'll mow their lawn, or baby sit their kids, or shovel their snow when they need it -- as a little way that I can share Jesus' love.

If you read through the Bible, you'll see that Jesus never let anyone's outward appearance or the remnants of a shady past stand in the way of · listening to what they had to say, or · showing kindness, or · offering to lend a hand. So, with the people around me I will do the same thing as best I can. I'll be an imitator of Jesus.

The **BOTTOM LINE** is that in the life that He lived, and in the life-giving death that He died, Jesus showed mercy graciously. So, with the people I interact I'll just try to show mercy to imitate Jesus. So I might show a **GLIMPSE** of the grace that has changed me.

OPPORTUNITIES WILL OPEN TO EXPLAIN WHY

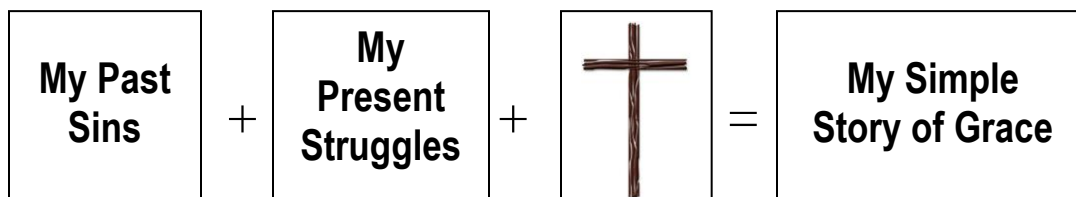
Just think, friends, as you do that, as you imitate Jesus, opportunities will open up. Opportunities to tell them **WHY**. Tell them in your own words **WHY** you do, what you do. It's because of Jesus. You simply share what Jesus has done, and what difference He has made – or is making – in your own life.

My friend Joe, takes his love for Harleys, and he joined a motorcycle club. There he helps people through their addictions, one life at a time. And He shares his story of God's grace – what Jesus has done for him, and how his life has changed since God has moved into his life.

EVERYBODY HAS A STORY AND YOURS IS GREAT!

Your story is good too! It may not involve tattoos and motorcycles. But it's just as good! And it is just as powerful! Because it's yours. One of the most powerful ways that you can show grace to people, is to share your story. Share the story of grace – God's grace. And everybody has a story.

Maybe you're thinking that you're the one person who doesn't. So, to help you out, I've got a simple formula to share with you, so you can discover, and share, your story of God's grace. And the formula this:



My past sins, + my present struggles + the cross of Jesus Christ = my simple, but *powerful to my friends* story of God's grace.

You see, the cross is where Jesus died for all the stuff you've done in your past. At the cross God says "Your past doesn't define you anymore."

The cross is where, no matter what your present hurt, it is wildly and drastically out done by God's love.

Everybody has a story of grace. When Paul was an old man he shared his life story with a young pastor he was mentoring named Timothy. Paul said: ***"Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.***

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life." 1 Timothy 1: 13-16

My past sins + my present struggles + the Cross of Jesus Christ = my story of God's grace. Who needs to hear yours?

Who do you know who needs grace in their life? Who do YOU know is harassed and helpless, like a sheep without a shepherd?

Will you imitate Jesus? Serve and love them? And tell them WHY you do what you do – it's all because of God.

Through you, God may change the life – and the eternity – of someone you know and love.

AMEN.