

Rev. Dr. Geordie Ziegler

Luke 18:15-17; Matthew 18:1-5; Ephesians 2:4-10

June 13, 2021

A Journey into the Country of Grace **Week 2: No other foundation - Grace**

Three weeks ago my oldest son Andrew celebrated his graduation from Whitworth University. It was one year late, but a great event all the same. To celebrate my son's achievement, and to spend some time with him before his move down to San Diego last week, he and I went on a father/son adventure trip to Alaska for 8 days.

I had two hopes, two desires, for our relationship during our time together: connection and adventure. But it was tempting at times to let disappointments in weather, or the stresses of long travel days, or regrets over the roads not taken divert my focus and turn my attention away from my desire to deepen my relationship with my son.

Now since neither of us had ever been to Alaska before, we wanted to take part in some adventures that were new to us and authentically Alaskan at the same time. Since we were going to try some new things, we needed to have a learner's posture. Two of the adventures we had planned were an overnight kayaking camping trip into a fjord filled with glaciers, and an all-day fishing charter boat.

The fishing charter excursion was a great success. Our guides provided all that we needed, and we had a successful day catching our limit of salmon and halibut.

Here is a picture of our kayak trip. The kayak trip had more mixed results. One thing I'm sure you'll notice right away is that we didn't have the best weather. While the trip was an amazing experience, if you have ever spent an entire day paddling amongst glacier ice in non-stop rain in clothes that were not waterproof, you can imagine our discomfort.

When we were packing our bags before our trip, I came up with the ingenious idea for us to wear neoprene diving booties rather than hard boots and wool socks as our guides had recommended in the packing list. Well, I had overlooked the small detail that neoprene is not waterproof and by the end of the first day our feet were completely soaked, as were our pants, and underwear. As it turned out, there were a whole lot of items we had brought in our suitcase that were unhelpful for our journey.

Our theme for the summer is “A Journey into the Country of Grace.” I have two thoughts from my experience with my son:

As we take this journey together, you may find that there are a few things you have packed in your biblical and theological suitcase that are not serving you well. Like me with my rubber booties, you will likely need to discard a few items along the way and replace them with the right gear.

Just like I was tempted at times on our trip to lose sight of the main thing – connecting well with my son – maybe you have been tempted at times to lose sight of the main thing when it comes to your journey with God.

To call each of us back to the main thing, we began our journey last week with a question: *What do you desire for your relationship with God this summer?*

That may be the second most important question you could ask. The first would probably be this: *What does God most desire for your relationship with him this summer?*

I am inviting you to sit with these two questions as we begin our journey together as a way of keeping the main thing the main thing, and opening your heart and mind to listen to your heavenly Father’s fresh voice of love that he has for you this summer.

This morning our focus is on foundations, and spoiler alert, there are two key waypoints:

1. In the country of grace, only little children can enter (Lk 18; Mt 18)
2. In the country of grace, the gift is the Giver (Eph 2)

Scripture reading:

Luke 18:15–17 (NRSV) ¹⁵ People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. ¹⁶ But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁷ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus adds another layer:

Matthew 18:1–5 (NRSV) [At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ² He called a child, whom he put among them, ³ and said,] “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

What does Jesus mean here? Is he just being a nice guy, or is there something more significant going on? Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include this story. It is clearly important.

Notice the contrast between the idea of a “Kingdom” and a “little child.” This is not the kind of kingdom we normally think of.

- This kingdom belongs to the children
- Only children enter it
- In this kingdom, greatness is measured by humility
- In this kingdom, Jesus himself is represented by the children such that to welcome another child is to welcome Jesus himself

Wow. Jesus is saying that in his Father’s kingdom, not only are children the only ones who get in, but children hold the “top” positions (if we can even use such hierarchical imagery). It is a children’s kingdom AND it is the kingdom of God. What are we to make of this?

This is not the kind of kingdom one might expect an Almighty Omnipotent Creator God to rule. Does God want us to be like little children so he can boss us all around even more?

Unlikely.

I believe Jesus here is speaking of his own experience. Jesus knows the ‘secrets’ of the kingdom of God, and the greatest secret is “God” is NOT an Almighty Dictator, but a good and loving Father. And Jesus is the Father’s beloved child.

In last week’s passage from **Matthew 11:25-30**, Jesus uses an even stronger word than “little child”, and uses the word for a baby or a toddler.

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Jesus is not setting a bar we must leap over to get ‘in’ to the kingdom; he is simply sharing with us what he has come to know of life in the Father’s kingdom. This is what it is like to be a child in the Father’s kingdom. This is the starting point for any who desire to explore the country of grace....

If we are going to know the Father like Jesus does, if we are going to see what Jesus sees, then we will need to become like little children.

Yes, Jesus is childlike. As the Son of God, Jesus is the ultimate child. Like a child, Jesus' relationship with the Father is pure trust. He is not controlled by fear, not even the fear of God himself. The perfect love shared between the Father and the Son casts out all fear.

As the beloved child, his heart is gentle and humble. His way is light and easy. As the beloved child, Jesus takes naps.

Jesus has the heart of a child, and if we are to know the Father as he does, we too will need to become like little children.

So, what are you?

Are you sophisticated? Are you intelligent? Are you in control? Are you independent? Are you well educated? Are you capable?

Or are you weary of your striving? Are you tired of carrying heavy burdens? Are you ready to learn from Jesus? Are you teachable?

Now we are ready to take our next step....

Remember our two key waypoints:

1. In the country of grace, only little children can enter
2. In the country of grace, the gift is the Giver

I want to challenge you to put on the eyes of a child as we begin to explore Grace.

A fresh look at Grace

Ephesians 2:4–10 (NRSV)

⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, *made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved*— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us *in Christ Jesus*.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through **faith** (*faith in Christ's faithfulness*), and this is *not your own doing*; it is the gift of God— ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

This is a very familiar passage, one that I'm sure many of you have memorized, but our familiarity might make us miss some things here...so let's start with the basics.

- Twice the apostle Paul says "by grace you have been saved"

What is grace?

Christians use this word a lot, as does the NT. Given its centrality to the Christian life, defining 'grace' might be less straight forward than one might think.

- o V. 4 it has its source in the love of God
- o V. 5 before grace, we were dead, and missing out on the life God intends for us
- o V.7 It has something to do with Jesus
- o V. 8 "not of yourselves"
- o V. 8 "gift of God"

But what is grace?

Popular ideas:

- "God's Riches At Christ's Expense"
 - o What are "God's Riches"?
- "Getting what we don't deserve"
 - o Getting what?
- Any others? Other classic phrases about grace that Christians use?
 - o A gift, no strings attached, unconditional (*Is a gift with no strings attached the perfect gift? Does unconditional mean no strings?*)
- What do you think of when you think of the gift of grace? (tell a neighbor, and then speak out)

More questions:

- What are we getting when we 'get' grace?
- Does grace refer to the action of giving or does it refer to the gift itself? In other words, if grace is the gift of God, is *the gift itself* grace or is *the giving of the gift* grace?
 - o Ex: if I give you \$20 and you do not have to pay me back, the money itself is not grace, but the act of giving the money is what we might call a "gracious act."
 - o So is grace like that? God graciously gives us a thing (called salvation)?
 - o Or is grace *itself* the gift? If grace is the gift, is grace the same thing as salvation or is it *the means of* salvation?

Who would have thought so many questions could be asked? Maybe we need to come to grace with fresh eyes...childlike eyes.

The Gift is the Giver

Story of 50th surprise birthday party

- I had no idea
- Chris was in on it and he had LIED and asked if I would come to a special Young Life event down at the Old Camas Community Center
- About 120 people were there
- There was food, speeches, Scottish dancing, lots of cards, and people contributed to a common gift – a Traeger bbq

Let me ask you a question. Was the Traeger the gift? No. **The gift was the people** who came to the party. The Traeger was incidental (though appreciated!).

This one picture should say it all (Sharon's joy (and the kids participation) and hugging)

This is an image of Grace. The Gift was not a 'thing'; the gift was the giver – my loving wife and the people who came to express their love. Their presence was their gift. Their gift was their love in the form of their presence. The gift and the givers was the same thing.

- The Traeger was a side show, a little extra perk. But it was not the real gift. I could have gone online and bought my own.
- The real gift was the gift of themselves, and the ultimate gift I received was from my wife who planned the whole thing.

Now, let's just say, Sharon went through all this work for so many months planning this special event, and when the day finally comes, and I arrive to the party, and the mystery is revealed, and all those people yell "Surprise!"...what if, rather than receiving their welcome, eating the food, listening to their speeches, and joining in the dancing...what if, I noticed the box in the corner that looked like a Traeger and...what if, I made a beeline for the box, picked it up and carried it to my car, rushed home, and spent the rest of the night putting it together and missed out on the entire party?

This incredible gift of love, of relationship, of joy, of celebration...and all I notice, all I am interested in, is a transaction in my favor in the form of a BBQ grill.

Sadly, this is what a large % of Christians do when it comes to God's gift of grace in Jesus Christ.

There are two major distortions in how we have come to speak about grace. How we speak matters because how we speak about grace is how we will understand grace, and if we misunderstand grace we will miss the gift that IS the Giver himself. We will grab our Traeger, run back to our isolated homes, and skip out on the party.

Grace Distortions

1. External Legal Transaction (gavel and bank check)
 - a. Here grace is reduced to and controlled by legal and transactional categories.
 - b. Grace is the result of a courtroom decision in our favor where the bail we owed is paid by a 3rd party named Jesus.
 - c. The focus is on the WORK of Christ more than his PERSON. Jesus is the 'instrument' by which we are assigned a new status as not guilty.
 - d. Grace is a Venmo transfer in which Christ's righteousness is transferred or 'imputed' to our account so that our bank account is not overdrawn.
 - e. This is grace on paper, where that imputation takes place in ether world of "the cloud" and as such is abstract, distant, and external to us.
 - f. Our problem (sin) is addressed by God treating us 'as if' we are righteous, even though we aren't. Cognitively, we know we are positionally free and forgiven, but experientially we are still left on our own to fend for ourselves – until we die.
 - g. The good news is we avoid punishment; the bad news is we remain unchanged. The Holy Spirit remains a mystery, and is considered somewhat dangerous and for the most part is treated as optional extra-credit.

2. Internal Spiritual Fuel (fuel can and powerbar/protein powder)
 - a. Grace is an impersonal 'thing' like the 'Force', but we can get more of it if we do certain things. Like fuel in the car and we can be 'full of grace' or empty. If our gas tank is getting low we can go to church or do our devotions to get a 'top up'. The church is somewhere between a gas station and a vending machine that dispenses spiritual powerbars through the sacraments.
 - b. Whether we are high church (Catholic) or low church (casual Presbyterians), we can access a long list of "means of grace" that we treat like vending machines, hoping they will dispense us a double-shot espresso of grace to keep us going for another day or week.
 - i. Popular means of grace include things like church attendance, church membership, baptism, communion, bible reading, time in prayer, fasting, serving the poor, etc.
 - c. We are told if we train hard enough we can 'grow in grace' and build up more spiritual muscle mass, so that we can become the kind of people who can do the things that Jesus would do if he were in our place.

What is so bad about all this? In either form, the External Legal Transactional courtroom-Venmo transfer or the Internal Spiritual Fuel station-vending machine-espresso bar, we've swapped out the Giver and his Gift of a Party in his Presence...for the Traeger.

When we understand grace in these 2 distorted ways, we trade God's personal gift of himself for an impersonal, instrumental 'thing'. We detach grace from God himself. We trade an intimate relationship with the Living God...for grace on an accounting sheet; or grace as steroids for a workout program. A paper or a pill.

But here is the truth: God is love, and when God gives his love, he does not give a 'thing' called Love, he gives himself who is Love.

Grace is God's gift of himself in Jesus Christ in which he moves into our neighborhood and lives his human life in our place and on our behalf so that through union with him we might share in his relationship with the Father.

Pick up just about any book on grace today and the assumed premise will be that grace exists as a fix for a problem. We have this problem of sin that separates us from God and the fix is forgiveness and that is what grace is. We have reduced grace to a subset of a doctrine of justification rather than recognizing that grace is the larger category.

Grace is God's gift *of Himself* – in Jesus Christ, which means he moves into our neighborhood. Grace has a history – in Jesus Christ. Grace lived, died, rose again, ascended to the Father and will come again to make all things right. This whole history is Grace. Grace is not a subset of the gospel, *it is the gospel*.

This means that Grace is larger even than the cross. It includes the cross of course, but it is much more than the cross. It includes forgiveness, but it is much larger than forgiveness. Grace is all-encompassing.

It is Jesus' life, and his death, and his resurrection, and his ascension, and his continuing priesthood on our behalf in which he sends us his Spirit.

The entire thing is grace. Grace is the foundation of all existence. It is the reason there is something rather than nothing. It is everything – creation and covenant. Grace is the foundation of all existence. Grace is the answer that precedes all problems.

Grace is when the love of God which he is and has within himself is taken outward to include children in it.

It is interesting to note how the early church Father's understood God's grace. Athanasius, the primary champion of the Nicene Creed which all Christian churches subscribe to taught that the incarnation did not take place because humans are bad, but *because God is good*.

Grace preceded our 'badness'; Grace is what started the whole thing in the first place.

And how we understand the story changes everything....

When you start to read St. Paul with these eyes, you will begin to see the gift of God in a whole new light.

The Father, Son, and Spirit have done everything already: *“you have been saved.”*

- In Jesus Christ they came into our mess without our vote to pave the way for us to participate in their life.
- They have set the table, and put out name cards, and there is a chair reserved specifically for you. You have a choice to show up or not, but the gift has already been given. It is more than a ‘possible’ or ‘potential’ gift; it is real in Jesus.

The gift God gives us is himself. He is the Giver and he is Love, and the Gift he gives is the Love that he is, and the invitation to us is to become like little children who joyfully receive the Father’s love.

The best analogy, even better than a surprise 50th birthday party, is marriage. In marriage, the ultimate thing you give is YOU.

God intends nothing less than this kind of total and mutual self-giving. He has come in Jesus Christ, giving himself completely. He did not send a check to fix the problem of our overdrawn bank accounts; he did not set up churches to be vending machines of some generic spiritual energy. He gives himself. And like any marriage, he asks for the same in return.

So the question for each of us is...do we want that? Do we want him?

Have we been too easily satisfied? Or satisfied with too little?

Closing prayer: Eph 2:4-10 back to God

“Open our eyes that we would see like Jesus with the eyes of a beloved child”