

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The amazing thing about grace

Presented by Graham Agnew

It's a fantastic experience to be on the receiving end of a genuine expression of grace and forgiveness. Many years ago my wife and I went on a weekend houseboat cruise with a group of friends. It was a very special time because it was likely to be our last time together as a group, for a long time to come. One of the friends shot a lot of video footage over the weekend and the plan was to edit the massive amount of material and condense it into a 30 to 40 minute video.

My parents were coming to visit and I pleaded with the owner of the video to let me borrow it prior to editing to show them some of the things we got up to on the houseboat. Very reluctantly my friend made the tape available and it took its place on the shelf in my video cabinet in readiness for its premier screening within the next few days.

When the time came for that momentous occasion, you can imagine my shock and horror when, instead of vision of our houseboat trip, there was a popular television programme which had been inadvertently recorded over the precious river cruise footage. I was embarrassed and humiliated but - I am pleased to say, every one of those friends made a huge gesture of grace and forgiveness in response to my pleas for mercy. We're all still good friends, even today.

In a much more significant way, amazing things start happening in people's lives when they experience the love and grace of God.

Part 2

In my early years I was involved in a number of churches where the emphasis was more on legalism and guilt than on love and grace. Oh, there were some wonderful people in those churches, but looking back, I can now see that many of us were somewhat hindered and restricted in our enjoyment of the Christian life because of our strict adherence to a long list of rules and regulations. "Don't do this ... don't go there .." and so on.

A legalistic approach to Christianity is sad for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it generally leads to judgmentalism and hypocrisy. These are at the opposite ends of the spectrum to love and grace.

Well, one man who needed a lot of love and grace was the fellow who climbed on board a suburban bus. From the outset it was obvious that he was in bad shape. He swayed, waved to the other passengers and began to slowly stagger down the aisle looking for a spare seat. Eventually he slumped into a seat almost at the rear of the bus and found himself sitting next to a lady with a very stern look on her face, clutching a Bible. She stared at him with eyes that seemed to sear the very wrath of God. Suddenly in a loud voice, designed to maximize the embarrassment for the man, she exclaimed "Young man, you are headed straight to hell!"

With that, the man seemed momentarily stunned but then he quickly rose to his feet, looked around and as he made his way back to the door he was heard to say. “Oh man, looks like I’m on the wrong bus again.”

In sharp contrast, I love the story of the young university student who had recently become a Christian on campus. He decided to drop into a large city church one Sunday morning. Unbeknownst to the young man, this was one of the most conservative churches in the city and having arrived late and been unable to find a vacant seat, he decided to do what was quite an acceptable thing in the university lecture rooms and that was to sit on the floor. He was shabbily dressed, had long hair and would have struggled to fit in, even if he had been sitting in a regular pew. But the sight of such a young man sitting on the floor began to make some of the parishioners feel decidedly uncomfortable.

It wasn’t long before a solution seemed to be unfolding. One of the senior elders of the church, old Tom, who was in his eighties and walked with the assistance of a cane, began to make his way down the aisle towards the young man. It was during the offering so it was quite an appropriate time to do what had to be done – there would be no offence intended, it would simply be a matter of asking the young man to comply with one of the long established, unofficial rules of the Church. But none of the congregation was ready for what happened next. As Tom came alongside the young man sitting cross legged on the soft plush carpet, he put one arm on his shoulder, extended his hand as a warm gesture of friendship and then, despite the difficulty with his arthritic knees, he slowly lowered himself to the floor and prepared himself to sit with the student for the remainder of the service.

As the minister rose to his feet to bring the message for the morning said to the congregation: “What I’m about to preach you will never remember but what you have just seen you will never forget!”

Within the Christian Church and certainly within our Christian lives there is a need for sound judgement in the choices we make but there is absolutely no place for judgmentalism. People are turned off the Church because of the latter, but in my experience, amazing things happen when love, grace and acceptance are extended to people in the name of Jesus.

Part 3

When we are on the receiving end of genuine grace and forgiveness, it can make a huge difference to our level of self esteem and self confidence. In Romans 5, verses 1 and 2, Paul makes this assertion:

Now that we have been put right with God through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Christ. He has brought us by faith into this experience of God’s grace in which we now live. And so we rejoice in the hope we have of sharing God’s glory.

Notice the benefits that arise out of our being put right with God. First, we have peace with God and secondly we rejoice in the hope we now have.

For many people, peace and hope are very elusive qualities but for the person who knows and understands that they are accepted in God’s eyes, these are very present realities. No one’s disputing the fact that in our natural state we are unworthy to receive God’s grace – there’s nothing we can do to earn it. But once we have embraced His grace and received His forgiveness, we are deemed worthy by God and this inevitably affects our self perception.

There's a particular incident in the ministry of Jesus that graphically illustrates this truth. It's recorded in John chapter 4 and is known as Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. She came in the middle of the day to draw water in an effort to avoid the stares and murmurings of the other people in the village. Yes, she had made a mess of her life having been married five times and obviously having made some less than desirable moral choices over the years.

But in her encounter with Jesus, she experienced a level of respect and care that she had not known before. Jesus gently rebuked and challenged her in relation to some aspects of her life but in the end he extended her His grace and forgiveness and the impact on this woman was remarkable. Verse 28 of chapter 4 says:

Then the woman left her water jar went back to the town and said to the people there: come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done. Could He be the Messiah?

Notice the difference. Whereas previously she had moved around in obscurity and anonymity, now she was out in the open talking with confidence and poise about her past as well as her present. The freedom and liberation she had experienced through Jesus had changed her perception of who she was and what her capabilities were. Amazing things happen when love, grace and acceptance are extended to people in the name of Jesus.

Part 4

When I was training for the ministry many years ago I worked for a furniture retailer in Melbourne. One of my responsibilities was to make deliveries but tragedy was to strike on my very first outing in the new Kingswood ute. I was heading back to the shop along one of the busy roads of Melbourne when I had what we used to call a "bingle". A bingle with a Melbourne tram. No surprises for guessing I came off second best.

The damage was not severe enough to make the vehicle undriveable, but it was bad enough for the boss to have a look of extreme disappointment on his face when he heard the news. I was convinced that my delivery days were over but to my shock and dismay, within a week of the accident, my boss, Dave, appeared on the stairway overlooking the main counter of the store and threw me a bunch of keys. "We need some pillows and bedspreads delivered to Malvern, Graham. Take the spare ute and try and stay out of trouble!"

I shall never forget my feeling of relief as I caught those keys and saw the warm smile on the boss' face. Nothing more was ever said about the accident but I knew that I had been given an opportunity to redeem myself and prove that I really could handle the challenges of driving in Melbourne.

The options available to my boss were many. He could have been quite legalistic about the whole thing in an effort to increase my feelings of guilt and fear. But he chose a different path and as a skilled manager he was obviously aware of how powerful encouragement and affirmation are in motivating people to leave the failures of the past and aspire to their full potential.

Many of the conflicts that Jesus had with the religious leaders of his day revolved around the fact that our Lord was constantly extending grace and forgiveness – but the religious leaders insisted on pulling out the rule book.

Jesus said to the woman taken in adultery: ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more’ But the Pharisees said (in essence), ‘ We do condemn you and we don’t even want you to live any more, let alone sin no more!’

It’s interesting to note that during His ministry, Jesus’ harshest words were directed to these overly pious and self righteous men who seemed convinced that it was their prerogative to make judgemental pronouncements on everyone but themselves. It was during one of His clashes with the Pharisees that Jesus made that famous statement – “*People who are well do not need a doctor but only those who are sick*”.

When we extend grace and forgiveness to people who have grieved us, we are not only building and strengthening the relationship but we are contributing to their growth and strength as a person because of the potential for them to see themselves in a brand new light. Amazing things happen when love, grace and acceptance are extended to people in the name of Jesus.

Part 5

Christian grace must never be mistaken for that sort of tolerance where no action or attitude is ever challenged and no words of guidance and correction are ever given. That is not the way of Jesus. He built strong bridges of friendship and earned the right to lovingly confront people about all kinds of moral and spiritual issues in their lives.

Making the distinction between loose tolerance and strong Christlike love, one writer has put it this way:

Tolerance says ‘You must approve of what I do’. Love responds ‘I must do something harder, I will love you even when your behaviour offends me’.

Tolerance says ‘You must agree with me’. Love responds ‘I must do something harder. I will tell you the truth because I am convinced that the truth will set you free’.

Tolerance says ‘You must allow me to have my way’. Love responds ‘I must do something harder. I will plead with you to follow the right way because I believe you are worth the risk’.

Tolerance seeks to be inoffensive; love takes the risk. Tolerance glorifies division. Love seeks unity. Tolerance costs nothing. Love costs everything.

Prayer

Father, we thank You for the grace and forgiveness that You constantly lavish upon us. Help us to be more gracious and forgiving to those with whom we mix and meet. At the same time, strengthen our ability to build strong bridges of friendship in which we earn the right to always speak the truth in love. We ask this in your name. Amen.