

11/6/08

Luke 15:11-32

midweekchurch

Outreach 06

During a conference in Britain about different world religions, experts from around the globe were trying to work out what belief, if any, was there that was unique to the Christian faith. Is there something that Christians believe in that no other world religion believes in. Its an interesting question isn't it? What is unique about Christianity?

Well they started thinking about answers and one by one they were eliminated. God becoming man? No many religions had myths about God coming in a human form. The resurrection? Once again other religions had stories of people coming back from the dead. The ten commandments? No those rules, although not in the same form, are found all over the world. What about Jesus himself, no he appears in both Muslim and Jewish thought.

As these experts were scratching their heads, a guy called C.S. Lewis walked into the room. "What's all this rumpus about he asked innocently?" When he was told what the debate was all about, Lewis, said "Oh that easy. It's grace." And walked out.

After some discussion the delegates to the conference had to agree. The notion that God's love comes to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Muslims have their law, the Buddhist the 8 fold path, the Hindu believe in karma, the Jews the covenant, the typical Aussie has the fact that they live a good life. Each has to *earn* God's good favour. Each is based on what I do for God. Only Christianity has dared to make God's love unconditional, it's all about what God has done for you.

You see the thing that makes the Christian belief different to everything else is grace, amazing grace. You see where all other religions say you have to do something to earn your way into heaven, the Christian knows that we can never do anything that would impress the Creator of the heavens and the earth. He knows that the moment he does just one thing wrong in his life, just one little sin, he needs God's help and forgiveness. And the only way I can possibly receive God's forgiveness, God's favour, is if he graciously gives it to me, free, gratis, for nothing, no strings attached. And this grace is given to us only through God's son Jesus.

Grace, shows us that all religions can't be right at the same time - because we can't earn our salvation by our works and yet at the same time be given it freely. For they are two opposite extremes - so one has to be right and the other wrong. So Grace is what Christianity stands or falls on. Grace is the most important word in the Bible. Because it takes us to the very heart of what Christians believe.

Which is why Jesus kept on talking about grace. But he didn't tell people about Grace like a dictionary would, with some sort of classy definition. He didn't tell people about grace like a scientist would, by dissecting it like you would dissect a frog and find out what on earth was on the inside. No Jesus told us about grace using stories. So tonight I want to turn to two of Jesus parables or stories, but I am going to place them in a modern setting,

so that we can learn about God's grace a touch easier.

2 The Stories of Grace.

One of the stories is a true one and it was printed in the Boston Globe a couple of years ago. Apparently a young couple got engaged and they decided to have their reception at the Hyatt Hotel in the centre of the city. They worked out the menu, they chose the china, the silverware and the flowers and because this couple had expensive tastes, the bill came to \$40,000. They paid half as a deposit and then set about organising the rest of the wedding.

They were just about to send out the invitations, when the groom got cold feet. *"I'm not sure I can go through with it. It is such a big commitment. Can we put it off a little longer?"* As you can imagine the fiancé was quite miffed and went to the Hyatt to cancel the reception. But when she got there she got sympathy, but not her money. For the contract they had signed read that she could only get \$4,000 of her deposit back. She realised she just had two options - to go ahead with the banquet or lose \$16,000.

Well the more the bride thought about, the more the crazy idea of going ahead with the meal became her first choice. But who was she going to invite? Well the bride just years before had been living in a homeless shelter, she had got back on her feet, found a good job and made a success with her life. So she decided that she would throw a party for the down and outs of Boston.

And so in June 1990, the Hyatt hosted a party like it had never done before. The hostess changed the main course to "boneless chicken", in honour of the groom. And she sent the invitations to the missions and the homeless shelters, those people who were more accustomed to eating scraps out of rubbish bins, instead dined out on chicken cordon bleu. They sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake, and danced all night to a big band.

You see that is grace. Receiving an invite to a party out of the goodness of the host's heart. Not deserving to be present, under no obligation to be invited, but being there out of the goodness of the host's heart. And so applied to God it is receiving an invite to the heavenly banquet, when you didn't even know your God, when you were far away from the standards that you would normally be required. Being offered forgiveness for no other reason but because God cares for you, he loves you. Grace - as someone once said is *"God's unmerited favour through Christ, for people who deserve wrath."* (Repeat)

Yet Jesus had an even better known story about Grace. And in a modern setting he probably would tell it a little bit like this:

There was a young girl called Kylie who lived in her parent's house at Terranora. Kylie when she got into her high school years started to listen to rap music. Soon without her parents permission she started getting not just earrings, but a nose ring, a belly ring and she even got a tattoo. Her parents grounded her. And in her anger she shouts at them "I

hate you. You have never loved me!" That night, although she is only 14, she grabs a few clothes and puts them into her bag, sneaks into her mums jewellery box and she takes her mum's most expensive pieces.

She hitches a ride and because her parents would expect her to go to the Gold Coast or Sydney, she takes a bus to Melbourne. And she does what she wants, until the money runs out. She now has to get a job, and what sort of job is available for a 14 year old with no experience? Just prostitution. And soon she finds herself not only selling her body for money, but in her spare time she is shooting up the money she has earned.

And then tragedy strikes, she goes to the doctor for a routine check up and she finds out she has AIDS. Her boss also finds out and not wanting to risk the reputation of his brothel sacks her. Which leaves her on the streets. Eating meals at the City Mission and sleeping in a disused drainage pipe.

One night it is particularly wet and cold in Melbourne and she thinks of sunny Terranora. She thinks of her parent's home and she thinks of her mums and dad's corner store. The girls who work there are well looked after. In fact even her old dog Scottie eats better than she is eating. She decides to go home. She goes to a local Church and they give her the bus money back to Tweed Heads and she manages to borrow a dollar coin to ring up her parents.

She gets the answering machine instead. Knowing she will lose the last money she has, she leaves a short message. "Mum, Dad its Kylie. I'm wondering about coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and I'll be in Tweed Heads at midnight tomorrow night. If you're not there, I guess I'll just stay on the bus and go to the Coast."

She gets on the bus and the silliness of her plan becomes very evident. She hasn't seen them for three years. What is she going to say? Sorry doesn't seem to be enough. And besides she hasn't said sorry to anyone for years. Well the bus enters into Tweed Heads. She can't hide the needle marks, or the look she sees in her compact, or her shabby clothes. This is it, she thinks as she arrives at the terminal.

But as she gets off the bus, there are 40 people there, all her old friends and family. They are all wearing those silly party hats and blowing whistles and throwing streamers. Across the top of the terminal is a huge sign that says "*Welcome Home Kylie!*"

And there is her dad. He is crying. He runs to meet her and she tries to say sorry. But before she can say anything, he says, "Hush child. We've got no time for that now. We'll be late for the party. There's a huge spread waiting for you at home."

In Jesus language that is what grace is all about. A love struck father with his arms wide open. A parent who is willing to forgive what ever has been done against him. A person who has been lost, but now is found. Someone who has been blind but now can see. We read on in Jesus parable looking for a catch, but it never comes. We search for a loophole, and there is none to be found. That's because our childish views of God are

often so wrong. We expect the Father to give a stern lecture. We think that God would remind us of our guilt, shame us into repentance, or announce his holy judgement. But we hear none of these things. Instead in the parable of the prodigal son we hear the Father say *"This son of mine was dead, and is now alive. He was lost but now is found. Come let us rejoice!"*

God's grace is like a love struck Father who is always looking for one of his wayward sons or daughters to come home. God is like the shepherd who will leave the other 99 sheep in a pen and go out in the dead of night to find the one that has gone astray. God is like a woman who has lost a gold coin. He will turn the house upside down in order to find the thing that is so precious to Him. One lost soul.

Is that your view of God? Is that how you think God views you tonight? Most people think of God as someone who is uncaring, unconcerned with the world. We sometimes think of God as some sort of penny pinching, goody two shoes judge who delights in sending his children to hell. And nothing can be farther from the truth. Nothing can be so wrong.

God cares for the lost. Whether they be good people or bad people, whatever those two terms mean. Whether they are like the younger son, the prodigal son, or whether they are like the older son. You see as the parable of the prodigal son goes on we come to the older brother and we see from his conversation with his father that he too is lost. He is lost even when he has stayed at home.

Why is he lost? Because he thinks he can earn his Father's favour. He thinks that he is accumulating brownie points by his good work. He is a good person but he's on another wavelength from his Father. And he is so wrapped up with himself, he is so concerned with his own actions that he fails to reach out to the lost around, he fails to join the party for his brother.

You see in short he nothing like his dad, because he has no desire to see others come into the kingdom of God. All he is interested in ,is what he has done for his Father and what his father has done in return for him. You see you can be lost, be far away from God and have lived a good life. You can be lost even if you regularly attend Church. You can even be lost in God's eyes and you think that you are safe. In fact the Bible says we are all lost, unless we experience God's grace.

For a short definition of Grace is an acronym God's Riches At Christ's Expense. (repeat) We receive God's grace through Christ, through Jesus. It is because he has taken our place on the Cross. It is because he has died for our sins. It is because he has paid the penalty for all our wrongdoing, we are able to receive God's free gift.

Not because of our lives, or our efforts or our actions. But because of God's unmerited favour. Because of the free gift that God offers to each one of us. A gift we just have to grasp. A gift we just have to open. A gift we have to apply to our lives. A gift is no good if we leave it unwrapped on the shelf. And God's grace is no good unless we actually

acknowledge our need for it, accept it and then let it change us so that we become people like God, people of grace.

For friends accepting God's grace will change your whole life. Not just your relationship with God, it is no longer what God owes you but what God has done for you. But it affects how we treat our spouse, our family, our friends. We now want to love them, do what's best for them, be gracious to them, even if they don't deserve it. We no longer live just for ourselves or our family, we live for God and want to reflect who he is to everyone we come in contact with.

Tonight God offers you grace, forgiveness, friendship, mercy, real purpose in life and eternal life. Please don't react as if it doesn't matter. Please don't think that your job, or your home or the footy is ultimately more important, it isn't. Jesus died on the cross in order to offer you this grace. That is why it is so amazing. Take it and see - it will change your life. And it will be the best change you will ever make.

Kid's Talk

Tonight I want to tell you of a tale of two coaches and two teams.

The first coach is a rugby league coach and she has a big game coming up this week. And because she has a big game she gets her team to come to training during the week.

(Rebecca, gets her team to stand up)

And she makes her team work hard, very hard getting them physically up to scratch.

Firstly she gets them to jog around the block *(jog around the chairs)*

Then to do sit ups, lots of sit ups. *(some sit ups)*

Some stretching *(some stretches)*

And then some skills like passing and kicking. *(throwing a footie)*

Then she thinks about the mental preparation, so she thinks about a game plan, how to beat the opposition.

(Have them sit back down and hand out sheets, and say "they have a weakness under the high bomb so that is where we are going to attack them, all right!")

And she talks encouraging words to build up their self confidence -

(I know that we are good enough to win this game, you just have to trust the plan)

Lastly she gives them one last pep talk - *(go out and play the game of your lives, boys.)*

And when they are win, they get given the trophy, they are the winners.

(Hand out a trophy and team acts like winners.)

(Then Rebecca's team freezes and allows the focus to go on the other team!)

Now the second coach is a minister. And he wants his team to be ready for whatever life throws at them, whether it is good, bad or ugly. So each week he gets his team to come to midweekchurch so that they are ready to live the life that God has given them.

(Stephen says, "well its great to have you all here today!")

So when they come together, they sing to God *("1st verse God is good to me!")*

They pray and ask for the help and strength that they need in life.

(Let us put our hands together and close our eyes....Pray a one liner!)

And they talk about life skills like loving our neighbour,

(Kids each give each other a cuddle)

forgiving each other sins

(Kids turn back to back and one then offers to other their hand)

and helping those in need.

(One child pretends to do some sweeping, other some washing up!)

But the minister also wants to think about the mental preparation as well, so he teaches

them about temptation,

(The kids sit down and Stephen, says “now the opposition may tempt his team away from the main game by distractions, complaining, frustration and greed.”)

And he also talks about his team

(you are the children of God. God thinks you are so special he has adopted you and he promises to be with them no matter what happens in life.)

Lastly he gives them one last pep talk.

(Go and live and make the most of every opportunity God gives you.)

And if they remain faithful to the end, they will not get a trophy that will fade or spoil or disappear, they will get eternal life with God in heaven.

(Put on eternal life medallions)

So this is a tale of two coaches and two teams. One team is a sporting team and the other is a Church family. One deals with physical fitness, the other with being close to god. And personally I think it is good to be on both teams. But if I was to make a decision about which is the best team, it would have to be the second team. As the apostle Paul says in the Bible, (1 Tim 4:8 NIV) *For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.*

SO WHICH TEAM ARE YOU ON?

AND DO YOU WANT TO BE PART OF GOD’S TEAM, THE CHURCH?