

“THE BEGINNING OF GRACE...”
by Rom A. Pegram (1/29/17)

I still remember standing in the kitchen of the parsonage at La Farge, Wisconsin, my mother working over the sink with tears in her eyes, my father having just come through the front door; he looks at me and says, “Either you’re going to leave or your mother’s going to leave ... and your mother’s *not* going to leave!” I was in my sophomore year of high school—absolutely full of myself ... and *so unhappy!* And you know what they say; ‘you take things out on those you love’? I loved my mother, deeply ... but I was taking my unhappiness out on her. Yes, the LAW was coming down; he was my father. I deserved it. And he meant it. If things weren’t going to change, then he was going to have to change something, which meant I may be on my own sooner than I’d thought. Why? Because he wasn’t going to see the woman he loved hurt like this again! And, did I mention, *he meant it...*

This was the beginning of my personal crash course in *one-way love*. The Bible’s absolutely saturated with stories of one-way love (another word for GRACE). As we begin today, I want to remind you of what may be the most famous story of one-way love in the Bible—a story that really hits home for me...

Traditionally, it’s been called the Parable of the Prodigal Son (and many of you should know it by now)... Here it is again (in part)...

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. ¹² The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. ¹³ “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴ About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵ He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! – Luke 15:11-17 (NLT)

The prodigal son may not have been told that it was either going to be him or his mother, but I still believe we have a lot in common. And I didn’t tell my father (or mother) that I wished them dead ... which was basically what the prodigal son did. But, I still treated my mother and father with great *disrespect* at the time...

The prodigal was very direct, wasn’t he? He goes to his father and says, “I want my share of the inheritance now!” And in those days, a son didn’t get a share of his father’s inheritance until after he died, so he was basically saying “Dad, as far as I’m concerned, you’re dead to me, and since you won’t oblige and kick off, just give me my share of the inheritance now!” *Unloving, entitled, disrespectful, and rude*. Sound familiar? It sure reminds me of me—who I was back then for sure...

Now, I know what my dad would have said as a father, and I know what I would've told my son if he'd treated me this way! And *this* father knows how reckless and self-destructive his son is, and I think he knows his son will squander whatever he gives him. So what does he do? *He turns everything we think we know about raising responsible children on its ear ... and gives the boy what he wants.* And we read this and think to ourselves, 'What an unwise father! If this father had been steeped in the proverbial wisdom of the Bible, he would have never made such a foolish mistake!'

BUT folks ... *this father knows something we don't know!* He knows that in order to win the heart of his son, he has to risk losing him altogether by giving him something even more dangerous & reckless than what he asked for. He has to give him GRACE...

Sure enough, the son goes out and blows his inheritance on women and wine. And when he finally wakes up and finds himself in a pigsty, he takes the only option left—namely, to get up and sheepishly return to his father. Let me remind you: *On the way back home, he rehearses his speech...*

I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant." – Luke 15:18-19 (NLT)

Of course, his father's been waiting for this moment, and when, from a distance, he sees his son coming his way, he feels such compassion for his son that he runs to him, and when he gets to him he embraces his son. I can see it now; in a much undignified manner, *he then falls to the dirt and hugs his child's legs.* Can you picture that? Then, the son launches into his groveling speech ... but before he can hardly get any words out, his father clothes him in the best robe, puts a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet. *He's a servant no more! He's been restored as this man's son...*

Folks, *the son brings absolutely nothing to the table; this is a one-way transaction!* Why? Because the father already has one son who thinks he's a hired servant (attitude); he doesn't need another (do you remember the older son?)...

And make a note of this: the father never once says, "I'll welcome you back IF..."—IF you detail for me all the mistakes you've made, so I can determine whether you're truly sorry and ready to be part of the family again... *Think of that!* The father doesn't demand anything from his son, who's put him through so much pain: he doesn't insist on emotional, financial, or legal restitution; nor does he make him stand in front of the local clergy and do penance. Instead, he rewards him; *he gives him the very opposite of what he deserves.* The father knows that his son is already aware of how bad he's been; what he needs now is to be *forgiven*—to know how good he can be! *Perhaps that's where some of us are today; what we really need ... is God's GRACE...*

Needless to say, in our everyday lives, *bad behavior and poor performance are rarely met with reward.* Punishment is more common—and reasonable, right? People need to

be held accountable for their actions, don't they? There must be consequences! The truth is, *we're much more comfortable with two-way relationships ... where we love those who treat us well ... and punish those who hurt us.* We want others to be merciful to us, yet when the tables are turned, it's hard *not* to be judgmental. That's the world we live in. But we also know those times when we've caught glimpses of God's GRACE. So, with this in mind, let me say this: *As we learn about GRACE together, we need to know these things: first...*

THERE ARE TWO COMPANIONS THAT GO TOGETHER: LAW AND GRACE. And God makes a way for us to be ready to receive his GRACE—*by knowing that we need it...*

My older brother, Byron, lives in Fond du Lac. Some of you know him. He's the quintessential older brother. Even though we're very, very different (personality/behavior), I've always looked up to him...

In high school, I was one year behind Byron and always trying harder to get noticed, as the younger brother. Byron was good in sports, music, and academics—a very typical first child. The way I got attention was usually by misbehaving. I didn't realize it was so bad until the day Byron confronted me. We were in the middle of an argument; I was complaining about never getting to do anything fun like he got to with his friends ... and he stopped me. Here's what he said, "Rom, I'd love to invite you to join my friends, but you're always acting like an idiot! I'd never know which Rom would want to come along!"

Needless to say, that was sobering. To this day, I've never forgot that conversation—his sincere concern and love for me—enough to tell me who I really was at that time. That was the voice of LAW ... *waking me up to show me how I really looked to him and others...*

Later on, after I'd cleaned up my act a bit, Byron began to include me in with his friends. And that, folks, was GRACE! I didn't deserve it; Byron knew that ... and I knew that, but, he decided to include me anyway. *I will always recall this pivotal experience as an example of God's amazing GRACE*—that one-way love that's so rare...

It was exactly what I needed to get through my turbulent teenage years. It's in the midst of real life, that one-way love becomes more than theory, more than just an idea, more than something churchy people talk about on the weekend. For it's in the midst of real life that one-way love becomes the very thing that saves us...

For now, just know this: there are two companions in life that go together: LAW and GRACE and they work together for our own good. *Next, we need to understand...*

GRACE IS ONLY FOR THOSE WHO KNOW THEY'RE BAD! The gift of GRACE is only for those *who actually know they need it...*

There's a reason why the story of the Prodigal Son has held people's attention over the centuries more than any other parable! It's a beautiful picture of God's one-way love, for sure, but it's more than that: *it's a beautiful picture of God's one-way love for an unloving and actively hostile person*. This parable, in other words, is grounded in the reality of our 'human condition'. It doesn't flatter us; rather, it paints us as 'entitled brats' who disrespect our parents and pursue our selfish ends at a cost to both ourselves and those around us. BUT ... *remember that the Gospel—the GOOD NEWS—only sounds good to a heart that knows it's bad...*

For people who think they're good, GRACE is frustrating. For people who know they're not good, GRACE is freeing. *Let me explain a little more...*

The Bible has a lot to say about human nature. First, it talks about men and women made in God's image (Ps. 139:14), capable of great acts of love & charity. It's all true, without a doubt! BUT, the Bible also talks about *our fall from grace* and suggests the unpopular idea of *original sin*—the notion that no one is righteous, no part of us is free from self-centeredness and sin, and the condition is sadly hereditary (Rom. 3). **(NOTE: Picture of fallen leaves ... in front of a cemetery—a very good image of our 'fallen nature'.)** *This is what the Bible means by bad; we're part of a much bigger picture ... where we fell from grace—no longer what God originally intended—and we can't do anything about this condition of sin by ourselves...*

Folks, those I admire most in this world—those I consider to be almost saintly—are those who display a great deal of *humility*. And I mean humility in this sense: as they've grown older, they've deepened their understanding of God's grace & forgiveness in their lives—*especially their need for God's GRACE!* They know their weaknesses; *they know they're BAD*—biblically speaking! This is what Paul was talking about when he said (Rom. 7:19), "I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway." If you can relate, this series on GRACE is for you!

We are, without a doubt, broken people living with other broken people, in a broken world! One of the problems is, we're accustomed to thinking about sin exclusively in terms of external behavior/outward rebellion. But I firmly believe, folks, once we understand *sin has more to do with the inside of us*, rather than the outside, we'll begin to see our absolute need for GRACE! And that leads me to the last thing I want to say today: *we need to understand...*

WE'RE NOT AS RIGHTEOUS AS WE THINK... In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount for instance (Matt. 5-7), he radically amplifies the definition of righteousness. He insists righteousness is not simply a matter of what we do or don't do, but rather a question of *why* we do or don't do it; his view of righteousness goes deeper than outward behavior, for it always looks inside a person ... *to the motivation behind the act...*

Folks, *our LAW is not so concerned with inner motivation, but more with outward acts!* For instance, if you get pulled over for speeding, after doing 78 mph down the highway ... *that is what the police officer is going to deal with*. In my experience, they really don't

want to hear about the 'why'. Their job is to deal with the outward act. You were speeding. That's it. And you're going to be ticketed. You broke the law and someone (namely you) is going to pay...

But, again, Jesus takes it one step further and deals with the inner motivation (Matt. 5:17-48/Sermon on the Mount). Whatever we think our worst vice is, Jesus lets us know it's probably much worse (on the inside)...

- If we think it's anger, Jesus claims it's actually murder...
- If we think it's lust, Jesus shows us it's actually adultery...
- If we think it's impatience, Jesus says idolatry...

By equating outside action with inner motivation, *Jesus kicks the legs out from under us, painfully revealing our righteousness for the house of cards it really is.* He's concerned about the inside of us, isn't he? And that's something we can't change on our own. We need God's GRACE—*our only hope of ever being righteous before God...*

Now, this may not be an optimistic, happy picture, today ... but it is one that accounts for a great deal of the pain and worry and exhaustion that marks our lives. This rather sober view of human nature I've painted today means this: **the great question of life is not *if* our addiction to control will cause us to act in foolish or self-seeking ways, but what will happen *when* it does.** So, where is GRACE in all of this? Let me answer this way: *It's when we come to the end of ourselves ... that we come to the beginning of grace!* That's our *first* destination! Remember that ... and we'll pick up from here next week...