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Giving Grace Its Proper Place

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Someone once said that the pastor's greatest work is not so much evangelizing the pagans, but Christianizing the Christians.

That is to say, that there are a lot of people claiming to be Christians that know virtually nothing about the religion. Perhaps they have a few Christian code words down. Maybe they will toss around words like Jesus Christ, grace, faith. But despite knowing some of the lingo or maybe having some sort of



morality to speak of, they really know nothing about Christianity. At the very least, they do not have a real Christian worldview. Or, despite their fluency in Christian-eese, their understanding of Christianity is null and void. In all respects qualify as outright pagans, rather than Christians.

This can be a sad commentary sometimes. But it is a reality that we must face. One of the greatest tasks we have is Christianizing the Christians. And that is true, not only in our day, but throughout the history of the church. As a matter of fact, this is exactly why so much of the Bible is written. When you look into the New Testament, typically what you find is that there are serious issues that are being addressed within the respective churches. Most, if not all, of these writings are in response to heresies or immoralities that have arisen within the church. So what happens is that the author writes in order to Christianize the Christians and set the record straight.

This is certainly true for the epistle that is before us this morning. More particularly, in this passage John has written a skillful piece to set the record straight on one of the core teachings of Christianity, that of grace.

Christianity, if it is anything, is a religion built on the notion of grace. If you are a Christian, then grace must govern your relationship with God. Grace is to be the thing that orients your whole life.

Unfortunately, grace is oftentimes one of those buzz words about which I just talked. It is oftentimes a word that is tossed around rather loosely. It is a concept that, while spoken of much, is little understood.

And that is the problem that John addresses in our text this morning. You might have noticed from our reading that John skillfully addresses three groups of people who have radical misconceptions when it comes to grace.

And low and behold, not much has changed. These three groups are still rather prominent today. There are those who abuse grace. There are those who neglect God's grace. And there are those who simply doubt the efficacy of God's grace. But John writes to dispel these notions, and give us a right mind when it comes to the place of grace in the Christian life.

The first group that John addresses are those who have a tendency to abuse God's grace.

I. We must not abuse God's grace by continuing a life of sin [5-7]

Now, to abuse God's grace is to blow it way out of proportion. People who abuse God's grace are people who really, really, really love God's grace. They are ecstatic about grace. They will talk all about how God is so forgiving and so merciful, and they will sing the praise songs that exalt him as a gracious and merciful God. They play it up so much that it almost feels like they believe that grace is the only attribute of God.

So what happens is that these people end up abusing grace by continuing to live the same sort of life that they have always lived. Essentially, grace really doesn't make any difference in their lives. There isn't any real change in the way they live. Their language is still filthy. They still filled with the all same jealousies. They still tell the same old lies and make no big deal about breaking any of the commandments.

This is so rampant in our day too. I think that it is the number one thing that I run into when I am out talking with people about Christianity. So many people within the church think that they have a license to sin all they want because God is gracious.

But John tells us that this cannot be. You cannot abuse God's grace in this way. John says, "If you abuse God's grace, you cannot have fellowship with God." He fleshes this out in the first couple of verses.

He begins by telling us that, really, it's not grace that should be the main focus of our relationship with God. It should be the holiness of God.

Look at what he says in verse 5. "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." John draws on the imagery of light and of its absolute purity. Darkness, of course, stands for evil. He says, "God, being perfect in holiness, does not have one spot in his character."

And if you are going to have a relationship with him, then there is no possible way that you can live a life of habitual and unrepentant sin. That's the essence of verse 6, "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness [that is, we continue in our life of sin], we lie and do not practice the truth."

In other words, there cannot be this incongruence. God cannot have a relationship with a godless person any more than light can have a relationship with darkness.

Unfortunately, people get overly focused on grace that they don't understand what grace is really supposed to do. Grace is supposed to orient your life towards holiness: towards God and his holiness.

We have to understand that, if we want to have fellowship with God, it has to be on his terms. It has to be a relationship that is rooted in the holiness of God. The grace of God isn't supposed to lead us to a careless and licentious life. It is to lead us to repentance and make us diligent in trying to become like God. That's what John says in verse 7, "If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

To walk in the light is to live a life of new obedience. If we really do have faith in the God, then we will walk as he would have us. God's grace will move us in that direction. And as we begin that new obedience, his grace will cover the sins we do commit.

So don't think for a moment that you can go on living a life of sin. If you are here today and your life hasn't changed much over the years, you need to recognize that you are abusing the grace of God. If you have been living carefree in sin and not living a life of repentance, then you need to understand that you really do not have a relationship with God at all. You've been lying to yourself all this time. You have been glorying in a relationship that you do not really have. And it is high time you realize that if you want fellowship with God, then you need to walk in the light and begin following the commandments of God.

You cannot abuse the grace of God like that and still be a bona fide Christian.

And recognize too that the opposite is just as true. Just as you cannot abuse God's grace, neither can you neglect the grace of God.

This is what John deals with in verses 8-10.

II. We must not neglect God's grace by claiming to be sinless [8-10]

In verse 8 he says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

Here is a person who does not even think he needs grace. We've gone from someone who talks about grace all the time and sins excessively to someone who doesn't talk about it at all because he thinks he doesn't sin at all. He thinks himself to be perfect.

Now, some of you might think that this is pretty absurd. And it is. You might wonder, "Are there really people who think that they do not ever do anything wrong?" I mean even unbelieving people are

people who think that they do not ever do anything wrong. I mean, even unbelieving people are honest enough to admit that they are sinners, right? Can someone really be so fool hearty that they actually say they have no sin?

And the answer is, yes. In the history of the church there have been what we call “perfectionist” movements. Obviously John is dealing with such a group in his day. And this sort of thing has popped up here and there ever since. Some of you might be familiar with the famous preacher John Wesley. Wesley believed in a sort of perfectionism. Though he himself never claimed to have reached this point, he said that a person can come to the point in his life where he loves perfectly. This is carried on today in some Methodist and Wesleyan churches.

This is common in a lot of Pentecostal churches today too. Pentecostals teach that you can obtain a “higher life” as a Christian through a special blessing of the Holy Spirit. It is believed that this special outpouring of the Spirit makes you a more mature Christian. And sometimes it is said that when you experience this great outpouring of the Spirit you can actually become sinless.

I remember sitting in a Pentecostal church and hearing just such a thing being taught. The minister was teaching on something else. He wasn't teaching on this subject of perfectionism. But in the course of the hour he actually said, “That's the way it was *when I used to sin.*”

Yes, he actually said that. Yes, there are people today who actually think that they do not sin... and, as a matter of fact, some of them are sitting right here in this congregation

Let's not be so foolish as to think that we are ever so pure as to not have this problem. There is within each and every one of us a little liar. We'll do anything to convince ourselves we “aren't that bad.” How many times have we rationalized away our sin? We justified it and we massaged it until it was gone—or at least so diminished in its size and offensiveness that we could overlook it.

Are we that much different from modern psychology? Modern psychologists do their best to convince their patients that they are just fine—that they are not sinners. They will stroke you and do their best to assure you that you are not a sinner in the least.

Some of you might have heard the story that RC Sproul tells. A young lady who was attending the college that Sproul taught in at the time came to his office crying. She felt horrible about having had premarital sex. She confided in Sproul that she had sought counseling and that the counselor had told her that her sexual experimentation was natural and she should have no worries about it.

Sproul told her that yes, she should feel terrible and that it would be bad if she didn't! She had sinned and needed to go to God for forgiveness.

But you see how the modern psychologist wanted to do away with that whole idea of sin. You're not a sinner. You are just a blob of cosmic dust that has evolved from a monkey. How can you be a sinner?

This is the same kind of ethical gymnastics that we all do though. We all like to lie to ourselves and make ourselves out to be better than we are. We'll sweep our sin under the rug. We brush it aside or we make some sort of excuse to vindicate ourselves. Maybe we'll even change the definition of sin,

just so that we can make the mud look better than it really is.

But, what is that? It's deceiving ourselves. It is, as it says in verse 10, making God to be a liar. His word tells us that we have broken his commandments, but we put it back on him and make him to be the bad guy.

When we do that, what we are really doing is neglecting the grace of God. As we fail to recognize that we have done wrong, we fail to get right with God and embrace the pardon that he offers us.

Look at verse 9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

He says here that God is ready, in an instant, to forgive us. He will wipe away our guilt and will no longer count our sins against us. His grace is here, right now, for you. All you have to do is admit that you've done wrong.

One of the things that I love about this church is that it has a time dedicated to the confession of sin. It shows that this church still believes in grace and forgiveness. You know that's missing in a lot of churches. We talk about churches today missing a lot of things. This is one of them. You know what is happening? These churches are neglecting the grace of God. They are posing as perfect churches. There is no time to admit their fault and seek grace for their guilt.

I'm glad this church still does it. I hope that you do it too. I hope that you do not neglect the grace that God offers.

What's more, I hope you do not doubt it. Yes, there are some people who *abuse* God's grace by living a habitually sin filled life. There are others who *neglect* God's grace by covering the fact that they are sinners. But you know what. There are others who know that they are sinners, and they *feel* every ounce of it. There are some people who are doing everything within their power to live the holy life that God has called them to, but they find that they can't. And so weighted by the thought that they have offended God (and cannot stop offending him!), they are cannot believe that God would ever forgive them.

III. We must not doubt God's grace by thinking we are too sinful [2:1-2]

If you doubt God's grace, then read what is said in the first verse of chapter 2. "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

These words are designed to be balm to your soul. If you do not have the assurance of the abundance of the grace of God, then these words were meant for you.

John's whole aim in writing this letter is that you may not sin. He wants you to grow in righteousness. He wants you to be holy as God is holy. But along the way, he knows you are going to mess up. He knows that you are bound to fail. But never think for a moment that God's grace can't pardon you.

He says that you have *advocate* with the Father. That is to say, you have a lawyer who is pleading

your case. Jesus stands at God's right hand, right now, and he is pleading on your behalf.

What is he, some Johnny Cochran? Ever since the OJ Simpson case Johnny Cochran has been known as "the guy who can get any guilty man free." Is Jesus Christ then, greater than Johnny Cochran that he can even get God to give you a not guilty verdict?

Jesus can get God to give you a not guilty verdict. It is not by being slick with words like Cochran. His is through the plain evidence that he brings to court.

Back in verse 7 it talks about the "blood of Jesus Christ." And in 2:2 it says, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not only for our sins, but for the sins of the whole world."

This is talking about the atonement Christ made on the cross. A propitiation is a sacrifice that is offered up to take away wrath. When Jesus went to the cross, he took upon himself the wrath of God. All of it fell upon him. So now God's wrath has been appeased, and there is none left over for any of you who look to him in faith.

And just in case you would want to doubt it, he adds that it isn't just for us, but it's for the sins of the whole world. This is to remind you of how significant his work on the cross is. Don't doubt it in the least. Christ's sacrifice was sufficient for every person in the world who looks to him. It is enough to cover every single person throughout history who would look to the Lord.

Basically John is saying, you cannot out sin the cross of Christ. His blood is the perfect satisfaction. God cannot be angry with a single sin in your life, because his wrath has been consumed in Jesus.

Will Metzger tells the story of a brush fire in his book "Tell the Truth." Out west fires can come sweeping across the plains. Once it gets going the winds can sweep them over hundreds, if not thousands, of acres. On one occasion a terrible fire had ignited and was eating up everything in its path. A certain farm stood in its path that was certain to be consumed by it. The man who lived on the property knew that destruction was imminent. In order to save his home he decided to sacrifice some of his land. He started a backfire and quickly burned up a portion of his land around his house and barn. When the scorching flames of the brush fire came upon his lot, there was no place for it to go. All of the fire passed right around him because everything had already been consumed.

That is essentially what happens when Christ becomes our propitiation. When the flames of God's wrath come they pass right over us. We are not touched because Christ's sacrifice has already taken upon himself the judgment we deserved.

You do not have to doubt the efficacy of God's grace. You do not have to think that you will be touched by his anger. Christ has fully satisfied for all your sins. There is no way you can be touched.

Conclusion:

This grace is to orient your whole life. When you see grace in this light it should fill you with such love that you long to serve him. When you see how much Christ has done for you by his cross, how could you ever go on living the same old life of sin? To abuse his grace like that is incomprehensible.

And to neglect it is just as absurd. When you see what God has done to cover your sins, you should

feel silly for your vain attempts to cover your sin or act like you've got no sin for which to atone. This cross should be like a magnetic pull that brings you unto Christ.

My friends, let us not be so mistaken. But let us ever give grace its place in our lives.

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