

ADVENTURES IN GRACE

ACTS 11:4-12

We sing “Amazing Grace how sweet the sound...” We’re quick to affirm that we’re “saved by grace.” Most of us probably say “grace” at mealtime. If we’re a few days late on a payment we hope there’s a “grace period.” The word “grace” is part of our religious lexicon. But grace isn’t just a noun. It’s not just something we possess, or say, or sing. **Grace is a verb!** Ultimately, Grace is all about how we treat people!

On a rooftop in Joppa, Peter receives a vision from heaven. God is allocating grace in new ways. He’s telling Peter that what He once called “unclean” He now calls “OK”... that includes both pork chops and Gentiles. But as soon as the vision ascends, there’s a knock at the door... Three men, Gentiles no less, challenge Peter to practice what he’s just learned. It’s not enough to know grace – if you’re not going to show grace.

If you’re a child of God, then you’ve tasted God’s amazing grace. Grace is “love that’s on the house.” What Jesus did on the cross gets credited to me - and all I do is believe! The Bible teaches we obtain and maintain a right standing with God by grace alone through faith alone. As Paul puts it, “not of works lest any man should boast.”

I love the Dennis the Menace cartoon. Dennis and his buddy Joey are on their way home from Mrs. Wilson’s house. Their hands are full of cookies. On their faces are chocolate smudges... and great, big smiles... Joey says to Dennis, “I wonder what we did to deserve this?” Dennis, who normally acts like a menace, responds with the perfect definition of grace. “Look Joey, Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies not because we’re nice, but because she’s nice!” That’s grace! It’s unmerited favor. God saves us not because we’re good, but because He’s gracious! And if you’ve been listening, you know this truth. We stand by grace alone!

Peter also knew this truth... If anyone believed in grace it was the disciple who proved chicken before the rooster crowed! Peter had been so confident that night. He would never deny his Lord - then he did it three times in rapid-fire succession. And to pour salt on his own wound - big, bad, braggadocious Peter denied His Master in front of a Campfire Girl. Oh yes, Peter needed God’s grace - Peter believed in grace – Peter received grace - yet in Acts 10, God teaches Peter to apply His grace...

Can we admit, just because it’s a truth we know about – doesn’t mean we’re living it out? For Christians, practice tends to lag behind theology. In Acts 10 Peter gets educated in grace, then the next moment Peter is called on to exhibit grace. God doesn’t give him the luxury of just believing in grace, he has to live it out! And as an ambassadors of Christ, so do we!

Peter has a vision and it not only turned his own life topsy-turvy, but it marked the turning point in the plan of God and the scope of His Church. This is why next to the Day of Pentecost, what happens in Acts 10-11 is the most strategic moment in the history of the Church. Never has so much theology been worked out over one lunch hour. This was a power lunch! Up until this vision, grace was like a live hand grenade Peter had used as a paperweight. He didn’t know what he held in his hand. But through this vision grace will explode into every practical corner of Peter’s life.

Let me read from Peter’s recollection of the story. I’ll start in Acts 11:4... “But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying: ‘I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me. When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ “But I said, ‘Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.’ “But the voice answered me again from heaven, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’ “Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven. At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea. Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing..”

Peter is in the seaside town of Joppa. He's lounging and praying on the rooftop. Its lunchtime and his stomach is growling... He's longing for a bowl of lentils, or Matzo balls, or a moist slice of mutton. He'll settle for a falafel! Yet suddenly the heavens open and a ponderous picnic blanket descends from the sky. All kinds of incredible in-edibles are on the menu. "Wild beasts, creepy things, birds and foul foods" are the featured entrees. God's tasty selections fly in the face of what Peter's religion taught him he could munch. Yet God the Lawgiver, tells him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."

In the first century, Jews and Gentiles were separated by pedigree, circumcision, Sabbath worship – but above all, they were defined by diet. A kosher Jew was religiously superior to a non-kosher Gentile. And that kosher Jew would never in a million years pull up to a table-full of God-forbidden food. Nor would he eat with folks who occupied the table.

Jewish dietary laws were the epitome of religion. Yes, the distinction between clean and unclean had some definite health benefits – especially in a day when meat wasn't always properly prepped and refrigerated. But kosher laws were part of a bigger picture. God had conditioned Israel to approach life in a certain manner. All of life was to be delineated as clean and unclean – holy and unholy - pure and impure – acceptable to God and unacceptable to God. This distinction was a grid that overlaid ever dimension of life - food, sacrifice, washing, houses, even people. The Jewish Law provided us a means to differentiate "good" from "bad." Through the Law you could pick out the good guys from the bad guys.

This is the purpose behind not just Jewish religion, but all religion. Muslim religion, Buddhist religion, Hindu religion, even pseudo-Christian religion defines clean from unclean. Every religion has its own standards, and taboos, and rituals that allow it to label "the pure" and "the defiled." Often liberal critics attack religion as the enemy of unity. They claim religion is the Great Divider of mankind. Rather than bring us together, it keeps us apart. It separates us into factions and inflames hostilities. And in a sense this is true. Every religion divides humanity into holy and unholy.

And no other religion did this as comprehensively and rigorously as did God's religion, Judaism. Kosher Jews were reminded at every single mealtime there was such a thing as right and wrong – holy and unholy. Good guys ate "clean" foods. Bad guys ate the "dirty birds." And of course Judaism didn't end with diet... It did such a thorough job identifying good from bad, by the time you'd subjected your life to the entire Mosaic Law you had to conclude with Rabbi Saul in the first few chapters of his letter to the Romans that none of us are righteous, no, not one. An honest OT Jew was forced to an uncomfortable conclusion... Everybody is a bad guy! In the ranks of humanity there are no good guys.

This is why Christianity picks up where Judaism leaves off. We say this all the time, but without its full implications hitting us... Christianity is not a religion – and that's true. Christianity is about salvation – not religion. Religion chooses sides – it picks out good guys from bad guys - it assigns white hats and black hats. Religion awards merit badges to folks for accumulating filthy rags... That's not Christianity. The Gospel declares that we're all bad guys. There's only one good guy... His name is Jesus! And the goal of Christianity is to bring everybody to Jesus!

Whether you're a Tech fan or Georgia fan - Mac-user or PC-user - decaf or regular - plastic or paper - Coke or Pepsi – boxers or briefs - Republican or Democrat – you're a bad guy and you need Jesus! Unrighteous bad guys and self-righteous bad guys – secular bad guys and religious bad guys - pew-sitting bad guys and pulpit-occupying bad guys – heretical bad guys and Calvary Chapel bad guys - all need Jesus! Today, the line in the sand for all of humanity is no longer the grub we put in our mouth... but whether or not the Grace-giver lives in our hearts!

Here's what's happening in Peter's vision, God is putting an end to religion. He's replacing it with salvation. Judaism was religion. It was God's religion – a perfect religion - but it was still religion. Now God puts religion on the shelf, and He chooses new terms for His covenant with humanity. Christianity is salvation – not religion... Peter needs to stop being religious and drop its distinctions. Folks are no longer labeled clean or unclean – chosen or common - white hats or black hats. The line of demarcation has changed. It's no longer good guy and bad guy – it's now a matter of receiving the love not one of us deserve!

Imagine, Bubba, a good ole Southern boy. Like Peter, he's lounging on the rooftop. He's got a sweet tea in one hand, and the Baptist Hymnal in the other. He's trying to memorize the third verse of his favorite hymn... When he sees a vision - a huge Hawaiian shirt falls from the sky! On top of this shirt there're long-haired Hippies, with bell-bottom pants. They're playing electric guitars, and drums, and singing songs to Jesus.

And Bubba thinks, “This can’t be! I’ve heard all my life you can’t be a Christian, go to heaven, and have long hair. Electric guitars and drums in church are of the devil...” Yet God says, “Rise Bubba, play and sing.” And Bubba has no choice. If the Almighty wants to change the rules, He can do whatever He pleases. Bubba is the one who needs to adapt. It’s no longer about religion. It’s now all about salvation!

In a sense, this is what happened to me. I was Bubba. I grew up in a traditional Southern Baptist Church. I believed we were saved by grace. But grace had yet to explode in my soul. I still thought in terms of good guys and bad guys. I spent all my time trying to define who was in what category. And Hippies... that was easy... they can’t possibly please God.

But when Delta landed at LAX and I drove to CC I saw God work in ways that transcended my personal biases. **Grace exploded in my heart.** The pastor wore a Hawaiian shirt, not a suit and tie. The only “hymns” the musicians knew were the other guys in the band. Long hairs sat next to crew cuts. There was nothing religious, or traditional, or churchy about the place. Yet the presence of God and love of God was so real and tangible. At CC I realized you didn’t have to agree with all my religious tastes – or my preferences in worship - or every detail of my theology – or wear the colors of my particular Christian denomination... to be accepted by God. For the first time I tasted grace... and to this day, I’m still hooked!

Yet over the years, I’ve observed the sad truth that we all have our own set of kosher laws. All people get religious at times – even CC people. Religion is easier than grace. Pride causes us to lean toward religion. As long as, there’s another rung on the ecclesiastical ladder to which I can climb my pride can feed off the accomplishment. It’s only when there’s absolutely nothing I can do – when it’s all about grace – then my ugly, self-righteous pride is left to shrivel, and wither, and die... **Jesus paid it all!** You and I are no more worthy of God’s favor than the serial killer or the child molester! This is why it’s foolish to think of ourselves as good guys and bad guys. We’re all hanging on by a strong, yet single thread of grace.

Religion was temporary. The epicenter of religion was the Temple – its codes and categories. Yet it’s no surprise, in heaven there’ll be no Temple. In Revelation 21:22 John sees heaven and says, “**I saw no temple in it, but the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.**” On the rooftop in Joppa God shows Peter that He’s through with religion. It’s all about Jesus.

Yet sadly, there are churches today where religion is alive and well. Here’s what happens... Church leaders lay down their own laws. They create their own litmus test for who’s in and who’s out. How you look, or vote, or educate your kids, or practice culture... ends up the dividing line. If you conform to the leader’s man-made rules you ride in the front of the bus – if you don’t, you sit in the rear. Believers are divided into first class and coach. It’s a religious caste system... the very opposite of grace!

If this kind of pecking order exists in a church, shame on its leaders! They’ve failed to apply God’s grace. There are no second class citizens in God’s kingdom. **“What God has cleansed you must not call common!”** Later Peter writes to all believers and calls them **“(God’s) own special people...”** We’re **“complete in (Christ)...”** not because we toe the party line.

When I walked into CC the first time nothing mattered about you... How you styled, or dressed, or groomed, or where you went to school, or if you went to school, or if you had a job, or your attitude toward the War, or your political persuasion, or even your denominational affiliation... Nothing mattered, but whether you loved Jesus! And it wasn’t that we didn’t have opinions on other issues. It was just that Jesus was everything!

Yet this is not the attitude in all churches. Other concerns can crowd out God’s grace. Superficial stuff gets in the way of our love and acceptance. People get judgmental! They’ll check a brother’s badge before they offer him their fellowship? Oh, he might love Jesus, but how does he stack up? We tend to divide into good guys and bad guys even among ourselves. It’s sad when Christians name call and finger point at other Christians.

Don’t misunderstand. When it comes to false doctrine that threatens our faith, the church has a duty to discriminate between truth and error. We need to speak out. But God hasn’t called the church to police the neighborhood. Our job is NOT to enforce the law, but spread the grace.

I like to give folks the benefit of the doubt – and room to grow – and the freedom to think for themselves, and work out their own salvation. Neither I, nor you, nor us - has a monopoly on truth. We can still learn from others.

When I first entered CC I saw lots of finger-pointing, but we all pointed one way to Jesus! It's sad to see us point a judgmental finger at other groups we differ with over non-essential matters - or worse, point fingers at each other? Rather than point, let's pray! Let's encourage, not condemn. We should be known by what we're for – not what we're against. Here's the big question... [Are we continuing in the grace that we've received?](#)

It's crucial churches today preach grace, but perhaps even more so, it's vital that church members practice grace. Yet this is where Peter resists... God tells him, **“Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”** Peter replies, **“Not so, Lord!”** And this wasn't just a simple act of disobedience. It was far more complicated... Peter is trapped in a bias. And nothing is as big a barrier to living in grace as a religious bias. It can undermine a movement of grace. Peter was hemmed-in by three powerful forces – [principle](#), [prejudice](#), [precedence](#). This is what keeps churches from the practice of grace...

Understand, some of our cherished [principles](#) may or may not reflect God's truth. Principles are informed or misinformed - depending on how they're formed. Peter grew up a good Jew. Tradition forged his principles... He went to synagogue on Saturday, paid tithes, kept Passover, fasted on Yom Kippur... And Peter kept kosher in obedience to Leviticus 11. He only ordered off the “clean” menu. His wife went to the deli with the kosher decal in the window. Shrimp, lobster had never crawled over his lips. Peter never savored a Varsity Chili Dog – or a plate of pork BBQ! [It was a matter of principle!](#) I'll never doubt Peter's devotion to principle. To me, a life without pork BBQ rivals the zeal of a suicide bomber!

When God told Peter to eat unclean foods - it was as if 1500 years of tradition, and the Law of Moses, and a thousand rabbis, and his entire Jewish family were screaming in Peter's ear to ask for another menu. From birth, Peter's conscience was drilled to keep kosher. This wasn't a simple preference - but a deeply-held matter of conscience - a principle. [Yet a misinformed principle kept Peter on the wrong side of God's will.](#)

Our conscience is an organ we train to act on cue. The conscience is taught by truth or tradition. It can fight against the Holy Spirit, or be His ally. Go to the Middle East today and you'll see this on both sides of the conflict. Jews can't give in to Muslims without violating their conscience - while Muslims can't concede to Jews because it's a violation of their conscience. Evidently, a conscience can be programmed by truth or error. Peter needed to surrender his conscience to the Lordship of Jesus. Some of Peter's principles were wrong - some no longer applied. God was blazing a new trail. A sovereign God is stepping out of the box, and he's recruiting Peter to step out with Him. But Peter has to cut ties with a few long-held [principles](#) if he's going to be part of God's work of grace.

Peter was also trapped by [prejudice](#). Don't underestimate the power of a prejudice! When Peter thought of eating pork and visiting Gentiles it just didn't **“feel right.”** Whether it was right... wasn't his biggest hurdle! This was outside Peter's comfort zone. Prejudicial feelings caused his resistance. I know some prim and proper Baptists who'd never come to church wearing short pants, or mow their lawn on Sunday... It wouldn't **“feel right.”** There are some things that don't **“feel right”** to you, but that doesn't make it wrong for someone else. A Christian's job is to represent God's truth, not his own prejudice. To live by grace I make the decision not to let my preferences, or my feelings, or my traditions govern my interactions? Your prejudices will close the door to certain people. Grace will keep the doors wide open. God made the Holy Spirit Lord over His flock, not you!

This was a tough decision for Peter - perhaps that's why the vision was repeated three times. He had to wrestle, and dissect truth from prejudice. God's grace needs to be free to touch new groups in new ways. Peter decided not to let the work of God be enslaved by his personal [prejudices](#).

And for Peter to obey God, he also had to step over a [precedent](#). He answered, **“nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.”** Peter had established a standard for his life. This had never, ever happened, never... Peter had never ordered sausage on his pizza! This is the type of conviction religious people applaud... Like an Eric Little never running a race on Sundays – or a Sandy Koufax not pitching on Yom Kippur - a guy makes a costly commitment and refuses to budge. Here Peter does the same, [but it works against God's will in his life.](#)

God wants to take Peter – not up to the edge of where he’s been – but to a new place. Peter has to step over a precedent in his life to obey God. Some steps are hard to take, just because they’ve never been taken before. Peter has a decision to make. Kill and eat - or sit still and disobey?

On the rooftop God was weaning Peter off religion, in preparation for an adventure of grace. Perhaps this is what needs to happen in your life? Understand, unlike religion Christianity isn’t a commitment to [a principle](#), or [a prejudice](#), or [a precedent](#). It’s the pledge of allegiance to [a person](#)!

This is how God seals the deal in verse 9, **"But the voice answered me again from heaven, "What God has cleansed you must not call common."** Notice, the Ruler trumps the rules. The Lawgiver overrides the Law. As followers of Jesus our conscience is bound to one passion – to please our Lord Jesus! We’re not to follow religious expectations, or church traditions, or even the rules of our own making... we’re to follow Jesus! Will you go where He sends you? Do what He instructs you to do? Love whoever He sends to your door? Are you ready for [a lifestyle of grace](#)?

And realize there’s always a knock on the door... Grace is never just [theological](#) or [theoretical](#). Grace is always [practical](#). This is God’s intention. You get grace from God - then you give grace to everyone around you. And it’s the giving of God’s grace that launches you on this grand adventure. Extend God’s grace and you’ll find yourself in uncomfortable places - with uncomfortable people - dealing with uncomfortable situations.

Good guys like to hang out with other good guys. They don’t want to get soiled or dirty so they keep a distance from bad guys. But when you realize we’re all bad guys in need of Jesus, you’ll gravitate to the lost and lonely. You’ll want to show grace to other bad guys, and bring them to Jesus.

In fact, start sharing God’s grace with the bad guys around you, and you’ll be criticized by the religious, “good guy” crowd... We read the story of the Prodigal Son, and admire the extravagance of the Father’s grace! But the elder brother had a different opinion... He thought his old man was unfair, and flippant, and soft on sin. He figured rules were in place to keep the bad guys out - why be so quick to welcome one home? We need to beware of this older brother! He’s still around. When you open the door to apply God’s grace – he’s the one who’ll try to slam it shut. The Father in Luke 15 is criticized by his own family for showing unrestrained grace. Don’t be surprised when it happens to you!

This was Peter’s predicament heading into Acts 11. At the end of his testimony, everyone accepted this work of grace, and glorified God. But initially, Peter was being accused by legalistic brothers of lowering the bar - of making God’s acceptance too easy... We forget religious people think that to really know God you’ve got to jump through a few hoops. Get rid of their hoops... and they’ll get mad at you! They’ll attack! Here’s my experience... it’s not the preaching of grace that draws fire – it’s the practice of it that’s so threatening... Give a chance to someone who doesn’t deserve a chance... and self-righteous people are up in arms!

Perhaps you’ve heard the expression, [“Grace changes everything”](#)? I like the sentiment, but it’s not just grace that changes everything. I’ve been to lots of churches that preach grace - and nothing’s changed for 50 years. [It’s grace applied that changes everything!](#) It changed far more than Peter’s diet... It changed who he invited for dinner. It changed how he viewed holiness. It changed the composition and future of the Church. And grace applied will also change the future of any church. It’ll change how we treat people... We’ll be more tolerant, accepting, patient, kind - less angry, and pushy, and judgmental. Living by grace is living graciously... Everything changes when grace explodes in your heart!

I love how Peter’s adventure ends... Gentiles knock on his door - he travels with Gentiles to a Gentile city, Caesarea - enters the Gentile home of Cornelius – and then preaches to a room full of Romans and Gentiles... This is a culture shock for a good Jew like Peter. In a sense, Peter just goes up the coast – from Joppa to Caesarea - but in another sense, Peter is sailing into uncharted waters. He is on a daring adventure of grace. The rabbis at the time would’ve said a Gentile wasn’t worthy to set foot under the same roof as a Jew. Yet by the end of this day, Gentile believers will know the same God - participate in the same covenant - have the same Spirit, the same power, and the same evidence as Jewish believers.

I can still hear the surprise in Peter’s voice... Verse 15 **"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning."** Before Peter could say much - before he could brief the Gentiles on keeping kosher, or clip a single circumcision, or explain the Sabbath... God in heaven saved the Italian Guard, just as He did the Jews. And it had absolutely nothing to do with anything, but God’s grace and their faith.

Did grace provoke Cornelius and his pals to godliness? I'm sure it did! But their good works were the fall out, not the cause of God's favor. The terms of our fellowship never change. All that God provides us is by grace.

I grew up going to church, and every church I ever attended preached God's grace, but it took coming to CC to see it practiced. At CC I saw the Holy Spirit fall on the most unlikely candidates. Like the Gentiles at Cornelius's house, He came upon folks before they could clean up, or memorize a single verse, or get a job, or gain any sort of respectability. By grace... God saved, and purified, and sanctified, and filled! It was all about grace! And it is still all about grace!

If there's one thing I want our church to be known as is "a [grace place](#)." People need grace. Grace is Christianity's most vital contribution to the world. Yet few preach it – fewer still practice it. People today desperately need to see God's grace in action... So... [Rise Church, kill and eat!](#) Today, let's embark on our own adventure of grace!