

LESSONS IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

GRACE: WHO'S DISCIPLE ARE YOU?

JOHN 1:17

It's dangerous to stare in a rearview mirror while you're driving down the highway. You need to keep your eyes on the road ahead. But a quick peek now and then is helpful. A rearview mirror provides a needed perspective. And this is how I live my life... The goal is to press forward. Don't live in the past. Keep on keeping on. But only a fool neglects the lessons he's learned. A quick peek in the rearview mirror reminds us where we came from, and what's important to us. We're surer of where we're going, when we can see where we've been.

Over the next few weeks I'm going to take a peek or two in my spiritual rearview mirror. I want to glance back at some lessons I've learned. I think they'll provide us all, a clearer view of what really matters. Here's where we're headed... For two weeks we'll talk about Grace. Then we'll spend four weeks on the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. And finally, we'll share a few thoughts on the importance of God's Word.

This morning turn to John 1:17. We'll read a single verse, and peek in the rearview mirror at the wonder of God's grace. John 1:17... **For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.**

In 2001 country music favorite, Alan Jackson, released a song entitled, *"Where I Come From."* It's a catchy tune, but it has a dangerous lyric. Like Alan Jackson I also like cornbread and chicken... Where I come from we do a lot of front porch sittin'... even guitar pickin'... and we're certainly tryin' to make a livin'... but what bothers me about the song, is the line Alan sings - *"and workin' hard to get to heaven, where I come from."* Ironically, that's the very attitude that's sending most people to hell! And sadly, *where I come from* that's a common belief - if not in theory, then certainly in practice. There's a lot of church-going, Bible-believing Southern-folk who are *"workin' hard to get to heaven"* - and they're misled.

Alan Jackson's song *"Where I Come From"* is an apt description of southern living - fried food, good music, church on Sundays, hard work. Southerners are known for all the above, especially a rigorous work ethic. But here's the tragedy... we tend to apply our *"toil and sweat"* mentality to our Christianity, and we miss out on something very important. *Where I come from... people are workin' hard to get to heaven...* there's only one problem... that's not how the Bible says we get there! Somebody needs to tell Alan Jackson heaven ain't for *workers* - it's for *believers*! Faith and grace - not elbow grease - is God's ticket to heaven.

One Christmas CCSM conducted an outreach. On the weekend before the big day we sat up a tent in front of the K-Mart in Snellville, and offered free gift wrapping. Along with the wrapping, we gave away a booklet with a Christian message and a cup of hot coffee - but it was all very low-key. The effort was just a way of offering a simple kindness in Jesus' name. So many Southerners have the idea that all churches are after is their money. We wanted to change that perception by doing something to help people - with no strings attached. Our intention was to display God's grace.

Over that weekend we wrapped 2000 Christmas presents for 1000 people. But I was shocked at the reactions we got from the shoppers. Even though our sign read, *"Free Gift Wrapping"* the question we heard most often was, *"How much does this cost?"* Folks would grumbled, *"Come on, nothing is ever free. There's got to be a catch? What do I have to do?"* And probably half the people who got their gifts wrapped wanted to pay us afterwards. It was fun to turn down their money, and tell them what we were doing couldn't be purchased. It helped us explain wonders of grace.

I've found if you want to surprise a neighbor extend some grace. Show an unexpected kindness. Do a favor that can't be earned. Bestow a blessing with no strings attached. To a Southerner a thoughtful act that can't be repaid is as foreign as a church that doesn't pass an offering plate.

I'm sure God has many purposes for our church in our community - but there is none more crucial than for us to be a dispenser of God's grace.

One look at the neighborhood, and it dawns on me - Moses has set up shop on every corner. You don't have to go far to find a church that emphasizes law – and trumpets rules - and stresses the dos and don'ts. The Law gets preached every Sunday in Southern churches. But where is the *place* that folks can find *grace*? God wants us to be a *grace place*!

As Christians, we usually think of Moses and Jesus as allies. After all they're both in the Bible – they're both held in a positive light – they both delivered their people... We assume they're on the same team. And in a sense they are... but in our text, John presents them in juxtaposition... Rather than side by side, he puts them at odds - on opposite ends. Yes, Moses and Jesus serve the same God, occupy the same heaven, have the same ambition for their people - *to love God and love each other*. But what separates them is how they accomplish their goals. **"The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."**

Understand the Law of Moses serves many purposes...

It illustrates what love looks like – both love for God and love for others.

Its requirements reveal God's holiness and righteousness.

Its rituals show our need for a sacrifice.

Its lofty standards expose our sin and shortcomings, and prove that none of us can live up to God's expectations in our own strength.

There's an ancient legend that says when God gave the tablets of the Law to Moses He sounded like a doctor. He ordered, **"Take these two tablets, and if you're not feeling better in a week, come back and see Me."** And that's what happened. The Law exposed man's sin, but it didn't fix the sinner. Man had to return to God over and over to atone for his sin. Yes, the Law was beneficial in many ways, but in the end it only brought condemnation. Galatians 2:16 tells us, **"for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified."** Hebrews 7:19 adds, **"for the law made nothing perfect."**

The Law makes demands, but it doesn't empower me to fulfill those demands... The Law lays out the rules, but it can't rule my unruly heart... The Law raises the bar on my behavior, without putting any extra spring in my legs... The Law concluded I'm an incurable sinner – I'm unworthy – I've got no right to expect God's blessing – *and O boy, is it ever right!* Tell Moses I said it... the Law did some good, but it leaves us condemned. No one on earth can *live up* to the law Moses *laid down*.

During a conference of British clergy, a group of theologians were discussing what, if any, religious belief was unique to Christianity. The group was struggling for answers... One man suggested the *incarnation*... But it was noted that several different religions had stories of the gods appearing in human form. Another man mentioned the *resurrection*... But examples were given of other religions where people had allegedly returned from the dead. The conversation turned into quite a heated debate...

That's when CS Lewis strolled into the room and asked what all the ruckus was all about. One of the theologians told him that they were discussing the unique contribution that Christianity had made to the world. Lewis responded in a rather matter-of-fact tone, **"Oh, that's easy. It's grace!"** And indeed it is! Christianity is all about grace and truth.

In his book, *"What's So Amazing About Grace?"*, Phillip Yancey writes... **"The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, and the Muslim code of law – each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional."**

Here's one of the reasons I'm so convinced the Bible and the Christian Gospel truly come from God – for never in a zillion years would a works-oriented, performance-prone man come up with this concept of grace. Author Max Lucado says it best, **"I've never been surprised by God's judgment, but I'm still stunned by His grace."** And I couldn't agree more!

On a recent flight to California I got upgraded to first class. I thought, “*Great, what a blessing!*” But it was really a mission. The fellow beside me had questions about Christianity, and how it differed from other religions. I explained to him that there’re actually only two religions in the world! Christianity is all about grace. In Jesus, God’s hand is voluntarily reaching down to lift up people who can’t pull themselves up on their own. Whereas, all other religions are man’s efforts to elevate himself. Everybody has a different idea of how to do it, but the premise is the same.

And the premise is wrong. God is holy. His favor can never be prompted by us. There’s nothing *we’ve done* or *can do* to merit God’s acceptance. **Yet... and here’s why we call it amazing grace...** God chooses to treat us as if we had actually earned His blessing. He looks at what Jesus did on the cross, and credits it to our account... We receive *His righteousness*.

John’s previous verse – verse 16 says, “**And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.**” Literally, “*grace upon grace.*” Jesus brings us grace compounded daily. His grace is graced stacked on top of grace. Through Jesus, God has given us an inexhaustible supply of grace.

Paul tells us in Romans 5:20, even “**where sin abounds, grace abounds much more.**” In other words, *the darker the canvas the brighter the light*. Grace never backs down when challenged by our sin. No matter the depth of our sin – or the stink of our sin – or the longevity of our sin... grace steps up to the plate. Grace always comes through in the clutch. It forgives us of our sin and earns God’s favor for the sinner.

My wife and I were engaged for a whopping two months before we got married. In regards to romance, I’ve heard it said, “**Don’t underestimate the power of love at first sight. Most of us wouldn’t pass a second inspection.**” That was my rationale. I figured the more Kathy got to know me the less likely she was to go through with it... so I tried to speed it up the process. But here’s the deal with God’s grace... *He knows me*. He’s aware of all my wicked ways – even more thoroughly than I am. Yet, His grace doesn’t even balk. His grace doesn’t even flinch. Even though I sin - because of the work of Jesus - He still treats me as if I don’t.

Yes, God is holy and I am not... Yes, I’ve sinned miserably, and fallen short of God’s glory... Yes, even my very best efforts are as filthy rags... Jesus never denies this truth - rather He’s reveals a far greater truth... *That God’s love can overcome my sin*. Grace is that powerful! That’s why I obtain, and I maintain, a right standing with God by grace and faith alone. When Jesus came into the world He brought “**grace and truth.**”

Here’s a beautiful definition: “**Grace is love that’s on the house.**” It’s not fair - it’s free. It’s not earned - it’s given. It’s not expected - it’s a surprise! Under Moses people knew where they stood. Moses meted out fairness and justice. Moses never graded on the curve. You got what you deserved. With Moses, religion held no surprises. It was Southern-style religion!

But when Jesus carried the cross up a hill called “*Calvary*,” an earth-shattering surprise was in the making... God was doing for us what we could never do ourselves... He was paying the price, unlocking the prison.

In the person of Jesus the holiness of God was *satisfied*.

In the sacrifice of Jesus the justice of God was *pacified*.

In the resurrection of Jesus the acceptance of God was *ratified*.

In the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the power of God was *realized*.

And through it all the love of God gets *amplified*.

Grace walked up that hill and shocked the world forever.

Rather than ask mankind to do something – to perform a penance, or to make an atonement, or to earn some absolution – *God did something!* Paul explains it in Romans 5:8, “**God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**” While we were still sinners... *still bucking, and belching, and blinded, and in bondage...* God loved us enough to take the initiative and in Christ die in our place. Rather than require us to clean up, God takes us “**while we were still sinners**”. By grace He accepts us *just as we are* and *right where we’re at*.

It reminds me of a young lady who lived in Boston. She was from a poor family, and for a time she even lived in a homeless shelter. Yet through hard work and a successful business she'd pulled herself out of poverty. She met a man, and they decided to marry. In preparation for the wedding reception she contracted the downtown Hyatt. She ordered a meal with all the trimmings... expensive centerpieces... formal waiters... and an orchestra for entertainment... The price tag came to \$13,000. But here's where the plot thickens... A few days prior to the wedding the groom got cold feet. He was afraid of such a big commitment. After an awkward conversation he backed out. The spurned bride immediately went to the Hyatt Hotel for a refund, but to no avail. She had signed a contract. The jilted bride had only two options... She could cancel the reception, and forfeit 90% of the \$13,000 she'd spent, or she could go through with the party. Though at first it seemed crazy, the more the abandoned bride thought about it, the more she liked the notion of continuing with the party.

Here's what the young lady did... First she changed the menu to *boneless chicken, in honor of the groom*. Then she sent invitations to the homeless shelters and rescue missions. That night Hyatt waiters, dressed in tuxedos, served hors d'oeuvres to bag ladies and panhandlers. People who normally ate half-gnawed pizza, feasted on chicken cordon bleu. Vagrants sipped champagne. Street people ate chocolate wedding cake - while dancing to big-band melodies.

And in a spiritual sense this is the perfect picture of Christianity. We're the down-and-outers - the spiritual vagrants - but we're dining on the King's finest! We're feasting on blessings we could never earn or deserve! We've been invited to live our lives at the banquet table of grace.

Again verse 17, "The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." In the Law, God revealed His justice and righteousness - but in Jesus, He revealed a love too costly to be earned.

Moses says *don't cross that line*... Jesus says *I'll bear the cross for you*.

Moses says *let's go toe to toe*... Jesus says *let's walk arm in arm*.

Moses says *you better not*... Jesus says *trust Me, I'll make you better*.

Moses gives us what we deserve... Jesus *serves up blessings we don't deserve*. If you want justice see Moses, but if you need mercy, call Jesus!

Here's the big question... As you look in the rearview mirror of your life and evaluate the grace you've known - the grace you've been shown - let me ask: "Are you a disciple of Moses? or Are you a disciple of Jesus?" Do you follow in Moses' footsteps - *laying down the law, going toe to toe with sinners, calling down judgment on rebels*... Or do you follow in the steps of Jesus - *surprising sinners with grace, loving even the unlovable*...

Let me assure you, I like Moses. I've seen "The Ten Commandments" countless times. I bet the real Moses is even more handsome than Charlton Heston... I even saw the animated version, "The Prince of Egypt." Hey, I respect Moses. I'm sure he's a great guy... But I'm not a follower of Moses. I'm a follower of Jesus... **I like Moses... but I follow Jesus.** I love, and worship, and serve Jesus! Jesus is my Lord, not Moses. And that's why I want to be like Jesus. Moses *laid down the Law*, but Jesus *pours out grace and truth*.... And we will too, if we're truly His disciples...

But here's where it gets a little dicey... For when I look in the rearview mirror of my life I see people, and pastors, and churches who called themselves Christian... but who, in practice, were followers of Moses. *Just as I like Moses, but follow Jesus... They liked Jesus, yet followed Moses.* Bible teacher, Warren Wiersbe, has traveled extensively among churches across North America. He makes the following observation... "There are Gospel-preaching churches that have legalistic tendencies and keep their members immature, guilty, and afraid. They spend a great deal of time dealing with the externals... they exalt standards and they denounce sin, but they fail to magnify the Lord Jesus. Sad to say, in some New Testament churches we have an Old Testament ministry." I pray that will never be said of our church, or any CC... "They call themselves a NT church, but they have an OT emphasis and ministry..."

There's a Latin phrase we carry over into English - "Modus operandi." It means "mode or method of operation." We talk about a person's M-O. Here's what I'm saying... there're folks who call themselves Christian, *and I'm sure they are*. They've sincerely trusted Jesus. They agree with the necessary doctrines. They want to please God, and build up His kingdom. They've heard God's call, and even enrolled in ministry... But their M-O is still M-O-ses... *Law is their M-O... they operate like Moses, not Jesus.*

They treat themselves and others as if they were under the Law. Their life and ministry are characterized by words like: *do, work, try, push, go, sacrifice...* But Jesus uses words like: *rest, trust, yoke, come, serve, give.*

What's *your* M-O? Are you Moses-motivated - or full of grace and truth? Do you walk around laying down the Law – always making demands and drawing lines in the sand? Are you quick to bring judgment? Are you a Jack Bauer Christian? *Take no prisoners. Shoot first - ask questions later.* Or is grace your M-O? Grace is how you function. It's what you're all about. Grace is standard operating procedure for how you treat people!

During the 1990s Christian leader, Tony Campolo, served as an advisor to President Bill Clinton. When the furor erupted over the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Campolo's critics thought his friendship with Clinton legitimized the President's position. Campolo received more than a few angry letters. One pastor wrote him, "*Don't you understand that Bill Clinton doesn't deserve grace?*" *Of course he doesn't. Grace is love you don't deserve.* I'll bet that letter was written by a southern pastor. It's amazing to me how church-folk can sign on to grace at a doctrinal level - but when it comes to dealing with people – especially folks we don't like – it's a bit more difficult to be full of grace. We tend to resemble Moses!

Moses drew lines in the sand, and dealt with sin decisively. He called for the ground to open up and swallow the rebels. But it was said of Jesus, "*a bruised reed He will not break and smoking flax He will not quench.*" Moses insisted on annual sacrifices – and forced worship – and detailed cleansings – and tireless adherence to rules... While Jesus offered, "*Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*"

Moses was tough on crime. He never flinched at meting out justice. But when they caught the adulteress in the very act, and threw her down at Jesus' feet, He told her, "*Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.*" Moses carried a big stick and was quick to use it on his enemies. Whereas, Jesus in His agony, said to His enemies - even those who nailed Him to the cross - "*Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do.*"

What about you? You believe in God's grace, but do you treat people with that same grace? In fact, have you applied grace to your own life? *When you run across a person who's a bruised reed, do you brush him aside, or yank him up - or come along side to support him until he mends?* When you find a person who resembles a few smoking, flickering embers – do you judge, and snuff him out, and build a fire elsewhere – or do you patiently fan it back to flame. Grace builds bridges. It rekindles.

Let me ask you, has your own Christianity become a religious treadmill? Do you feel the pounding and pounding of never being able to do enough? You need to stop your own efforts, and breath in God's grace! Jesus offers rest and peace. Grace promises us God's righteousness, so why are we working so hard to develop a self-righteousness? Grace will always spawn cheerful givers. It causes us to rediscover the *joy* of serving. *How often do you pick up stones to condemn another... or are you the guy who stops the stoning?* I know a lot of Christians who spend so much time fighting sin, they have very little left to love the sinner. Sinners feared Moses, but they flocked to Jesus. He was known as "*a friend of sinners*"

Please don't think I'm suggesting we should ever go soft on sin, or water down the demands for holy living. All I'm asking is that we recall Who it is we serve. Moses is **not** our master. Grace should always be our MO. Our leader laid down His life for sinners. Jesus is a God of grace!

Donald Gray Barnhouse claimed he could discern a pastor's readiness for ministry by hearing him read one line of Scripture. The candidate, seeking his approval, would read Genesis 3 - the fall of Adam and Eve. Barnhouse paid close attention to the reading of the line in verse 6, where God comes looking for Adam, and calls out, "*Where are you?*" If the aspiring pastor read it gruffly, "*Where are you?*" Barnhouse concluded the man didn't yet know God's heart. But if he read it tenderly, with love, "*Where are you?*" He was sure the man knew of God's grace. Do we speak God's hope and grace into the lives of other people?

When I look in the rearview mirror, and see *where I come from*, and the sermons I heard growing up, I see angry pastors. They talked about hell and eternal damnation, *but it was if they were excited we were headed there.* Some Sundays I left church with the smell of soot on my clothes. Today, when I preach, I first take a quick peek in the rearview mirror. Rather than beat sheep, I want to feed sheep. Rather than whip, I try to equip. Instead of *bringing down the hammer*, I try to *bring down the grace!*

Since becoming a pastor the nicest compliment I've ever received came one Sunday after a sermon. A lady told me, "Pastor Sandy, I always hear a smile in your voice." I hope all my sermons are permeated with grace!

Whose disciple are you? Who do you really represent: Moses or Jesus? When people speak of you do they use phrases like holier-than-thou, pushy, perfectionist, judgmental – they could just as easily say Moses. Or do people – even undeserving people - see in you grace and truth?

The first plague Moses brought on Egypt was to turn water into blood. The miracle spoke of judgment and death. But the first miracle our Savior worked in Galilee turned water into wine. His miracle spoke of joy and life. On the day Moses brought the tablets of the Law down from Mount Sinai 3000 people died in a plague. On the day the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Church 3000 people heard His grace and truth and were saved. The OT ends in with the word, "curse". The NT ends with the phrase, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." It's all about grace!

Years ago a concert took place in Wembley Stadium. It was a tribute to the end of Apartheid in South Africa. The headliner that night was Guns 'n Roses. For hours they hyped up 70,000 drugged and drunk Londoners. Yet at evening's end, the promoters closed the concert in a unique way. They brought on stage an opera singer - a black African named Jessye Norman. No band, no back-up singers, no sound track - just Jessye.

At first the crowd booed and hissed... Until Jessye sang, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found; was blind, but now I see." Instantly a mysterious power rolled over the stadium. The once rowdy crowd unexpectedly settled down. By verse two, she had the former revelers in the palm of her hand. By the third stanza, thousands of people had dug deep into their memories, and were singing the lyrics of "Amazing Grace" with Jessye.

Later the opera singer confessed she had no idea what had happened in Wembley Stadium that night. But I know what happened... **Grace came!** And when grace comes it strikes a cord in the human heart. It sobers us. It stirs up an inner longing. Grace points us to its source – to Jesus. The rowdy crowd in London that night is a microcosm of today's world – empty people are lost in the frenzy - grabbing for the world's pleasures. *Until grace comes* and they hear again that God cares, and He's dying to prove it... Grace brings the hope and healing for which we all seek. It does what Law could never do – it changes us. It fills our inner emptiness.

Grace is the greatest power on the planet! *And where I come from...* we need it! We need to receive, and then dispense God's glorious grace. So, whose disciple are you? Is your M-O *grunt* or *grace*? Do you follow Moses or Jesus?... I pray that all of us will emit the sweet aroma of grace!