

PAUL MUST BE JOKING!
Romans 12:9-18, 21

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Avon Lake UCC
6 September 2020
(online worship only)

Last week, Beau sang one of the most popular and best-loved hymns, “Amazing Grace.” “Amazing Grace” is not just a song title. “Amazing” is truly the only adjective that is appropriate for the concept of grace.

Here’s what grace means in the Christian life:

1. Grace flows from God to humans.
2. God offers grace freely - grace is an undeserved gift
3. God offers grace joyfully.

You can’t do anything to earn grace. Grace is God choosing to love us, not because of the good we’ve done, not in spite of our mistakes. Just a free choice, made from love. Grace is God choosing to forgive us, not because we did a certain amount of penance, but because God loves us and wants us to live in freedom.

Paul begins Romans chapter 12 by talking about grace - we used this passage a few weeks ago - Paul writes to the Romans out of a well of God-given grace and then Paul reminds the Romans that they each have been given gifts through God’s grace, different gifts but each of them necessary, each of them valuable, each of them connected to God’s graceful, loving forgiving spirit.

Now Paul continues this logic. If you are people connected to God’s loving grace, people in community together bound by grace, then it naturally follows that we too are called to be people of grace.

Grace isn't just received; it's also passed on. Here's how one writer puts it: "The idea that we are called to be people of grace, by some mechanism in which God's grace fills us up and spills out into the world, is ancient and Christian. The Bible encourages us to infuse grace into our actions and even our words. If we are the offspring of a gracious God, it stands to reason that we are to be gracious children. Grace is woven into our DNA."

We are called to be gracious people, because we are children of a gracious God. But many people don't think of the word "gracious" when they think of Christians...a recent poll revealed that there are 30 million Americans who are FORMER churchgoers. They haven't left their faith but they have left the church and one of the main reasons is that Christians often come across as judgmental and hypocritical and overly critical of people with whom they differ. The way Christians behave is turning people away from the church.

Paul calls Christians to exhibit grace. To TRY to exhibit grace not just some of the time, but all of the time. Not just with people with whom we agree and with whom we share commonalities (that's easy!) but **especially** towards people with whom we have little in common and few areas of agreement. We are called to exhibit grace. Yes, even in an election year. Even in this election year. **Especially in this election year.**

What does that grace look like? It looks like behavior that is so compelling that people will be drawn to it. Loving one another with mutual affection. Outdoing one another in showing honor. Rejoicing in hope. Patience in suffering. Persevering in prayer. It looks like contributing to the needs of the saints and extending hospitality to strangers.

That's graceful, gracious, grace-filled living. Is that really possible? In this election year? Is Paul joking?

Christian grace is this: blessing those who persecute us. Not cursing them. Blessing them. Rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep. Living in harmony with one another. **LIVING IN HARMONY WITH ONE ANOTHER!** Not just those who share our political opinions! Living peaceably with all. And then this beautiful last line: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Can you imagine how attractive it would be to see a community of people really trying to embody those words?

Here's one more fact about those 30 million people who have left the church - many of them really miss it. They miss, especially, the sense of community. And if they saw a group of Christians honestly attempting to live with a sense of grace, I believe some of them would come back.

One biblical scholar says that the Christian lifestyle Paul describes in this passage is energetic, profoundly optimistic, and countercultural.

What would it look like to try to live that gracious lifestyle between now and the election?

Since social media is not known for being a gracious place (that's what's called an understatement), let's talk about how we behave with grace online. This meme was widely shared on social media over the last few weeks...These phrases are not from the Bible. In fact, I don't know who wrote this, but I think they are in keeping with the spirit of Paul's advice to us to live graciously..."Post Wisely over the next months. Contribute to discourse, not division. Check your facts. Resist memes and cheap digs. Create

beautiful content. We can transcend the bitterness and be better, even when we disagree.”

Is this possible, this year of all years, this year that has so often been called “the most important election in our lifetimes?” I’m not speaking as an apolitical person. I have already requested my absentee ballot. I feel passionately about which candidate I think is best for our country. Doug and I made a donation to one of the presidential campaigns this year, something we don’t always do. I’m not saying this election doesn’t matter. Far from it. I’m saying that the way we behave ALSO matters.

Paul isn’t joking. There is no Christian witness if Christians don’t act any differently than anyone else. Name-calling people who disagree with us is the easiest thing in the world. But can we do this instead? Can we say what we believe and why, without denigrating those whom we know are of a different mindset? Wouldn’t we be more influential in all good ways if we were able to state our values without stooping to childish attacks on those who vote differently than we?

We become who we are because of all kinds of factors: our family backgrounds, the stories we heard around the dinner table, experiences while growing up, people we’ve met along the way. We form our opinions based on our life story. Last Sunday, when Tim Harris told part of his life story, I realized again how powerful it is to simply listen to someone’s story. You don’t argue someone’s story. Their truth belongs to them. If you listen, as Tim asked us to, with open minds and hearts you begin to learn why different people hold different opinions. You honor the truth of someone’s story even if you disagree with one of their positions.

This is what it means to live with grace, to live in harmony with one another, to outdo one another in showing honor.

I want to introduce you to two people. This is Robert P. George, known as Robbie: If you think he looks like a fairly conservative guy, you'd be right. He is a law professor at Princeton, a practicing Catholic, and he has been called this country's most influential conservative Christian thinker.

This is Cornel West: He is a philosophy professor at Harvard, has taught in several seminaries, has written 20 books, is a civil rights activist and calls himself a Democratic Socialist.

Would it surprise you to learn that these two are friends? It's no joke.

They have been working together and on the speaking circuit together for years, talking about their differences and talking about their unusual friendship. At one lecture at Duke University, George said, "Friendship is when you want something good to happen for the other person, when you see the other person's humanity." And West said, similarly, "Love and friendship transcend politics; you revel in the other person's humanity." West and George have taught classes together, out of a deep belief that our fragile democracy is doomed if we do not learn to see one another as human beings and learn from each other. Professor George says, "We're a couple of guys with some pretty strong opinions, but we recognize nobody has a monopoly on the truth." They try to practice and teach what they call heroic humility. They each have faced criticism from people who have said, "How can you be friends with him? Do you know what he believes?" And they say back, "When seeking the truth, we must be willing, even eager,

to engage with those who believe differently than us — and to do so in love.” And Cornel West says this friendship is one way he lives out his Christian calling.

They co-wrote an editorial for the Boston Globe in July of this year, which I commend to you; it’s entitled, “To unite the country, we need honesty and courage.” I will link it when we post this sermon on our website. Here is an excerpt: “We need the honesty and courage to express dissent — to say, “No, I will *not* go along” — when conscience tells us that our own ideological or political tribe has gone astray or gone too far or become fanatical and blind to integrity and the dignity of all.

We need the honesty and courage to stand up — to stand alone, if necessary — to speak the truth, as God gives us to see the truth, to the politically, economically, and culturally powerful as well as to the relatively powerless.

We need the honesty and courage to think first of the weak, the poor, the vulnerable, and the impact on them, for good or for ill, of our own actions; the actions of institutions and the actions of government at all levels. This will not generate unanimity as to what policies are best. Reasonable people of good will will often disagree. But this can — and we believe must — be a starting point on which there is common ground.

We need the honesty and courage to recognize and acknowledge that there are reasonable people of good will who do not share even some of our deepest, most cherished beliefs. This is true for Christians, like ourselves, or members of other traditions of faith, as well as for religious skeptics and atheists. It is true for conservatives as well as progressives, for libertarians as well as socialists.

We need the honesty and courage to treat decent and honest people with whom we disagree — even on the most consequential questions — as partners in truth-seeking and fellow citizens ... not as enemies to be destroyed. And we must always respect and protect their human rights and civil liberties.”

If Robbie George and Cornel West can become friends, demonstrating a profound level of grace, surely we can refrain from the quick and easy social media slam that does nothing to change hearts and minds except, perhaps, prove to those who are watching that Christians are no different than anyone else.

Let us not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Amen.

Sources cited: [Learning to Speak God from Scratch](#), by Jonathan Merritt

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/07/15/opinion/unite-country-we-need-honesty-courage/>