

Amazing Grace, I

"That's not fair!" Ever say that to your parents? Being "fair" is a big thing with us, isn't it? Look up the word "fairness" on Google and you will get 4,000,000 hits!

There's "Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting," "Workplace Fairness," "Fairness.org" (Dedicated to providing fairness in employment and housing to the gay and lesbian community.) "Fairness.com" (an information clearinghouse to help you research any topic related to fairness), and Fox News who says their news reporting is fair and balanced.

The idea of "fairness" has even distorted courts. Juries decided cases on the basis of what seems fair.

Kathleen Robertson of Austin Texas was awarded \$780,000 by a jury of her peers after breaking her ankle tripping over a toddler who was running amok inside a furniture store. She sued the furniture store and won. The owners of the store were understandably surprised at the verdict, considering the misbehaving kid was Ms. Robertson's own son.

A 19 year old, Carl Truman of Los Angeles won \$74,000 and medical expenses when his neighbour ran over his hand with a Honda Accord. Mr. Truman apparently didn't notice there was someone at the wheel of the car, when he was trying to steal his neighbors hubcaps.

And my all time favorite...Terrence Dickson of Bristol Pennsylvania was exiting a house he finished robbing by way of the garage. He wasn't able to get the garage door to go up, because the automatic door opener was malfunctioning. He couldn't get back in the house because the door connecting the house and garage locked when he pulled it shut. The family was on vacation. Mr. Dickson found himself locked in the garage for eight days. He subsisted on a case of Pepsi and a large bag of dry dog food. Mr. Dickson sued the homeowner's insurance claiming the situation caused him undue mental anguish. The jury agreed to the tune of half a million dollars.

Hey, it was only fair that these people should be compensated for their pain and suffering!

Well, just so you know that cooler heads do occasionally prevail: Kenmore Inc., the makers of Dorothy Johnson's microwave, were found not liable for the death of Mrs.

Johnson's poodle after she gave it a bath and attempted to dry it by putting the dog in her microwave for, "just a few minutes, on low," The case was dismissed.

What if I were to tell you this morning that God is not fair (at least not in the way we define fairness); how would you react?

The word "fair" is used just 19 times in our English Bibles, and most of the references use "fair" as a synonym for "beautiful."

Actually the central message of the Bible, the heart of God's message to us is a story of unfairness.

As you read the Bible you quickly discover that it's theme isn't fairness. Instead the theme of the Bible is a concept that's totally foreign to our way of thinking and our life experience. The theme of the Bible is God's grace.

For the next three weeks we want to look at the topic "Amazing Grace."

You can eat at the Amazing Grace Bakery in Duluth Min., Listen to Arlo Guthery sing "Amazing Grace" on the Woodstock album, hear Amazing Grace played on bag pipes at most governmental sponsored funerals and memorial services, sail the AMAZING GRACE, a converted British Navy Lighthouse Tender operated by Windjammer Barefoot Cruises, of Miami, lather up with Amazing Grace shampoo, bath & shower gel, or shop for health food at the Amazing Grace nutrition Center in Louisville, Kentucky.

Our culture seems to have a fascination with the name Amazing Grace.

What is grace? What is it really all about? What makes grace so amazing anyway?

The English word "grace" is used 139 times in our Bibles. It's a theme that's obviously woven through the very fabric of Scripture.

Grace ought to be the driving factor in our lives. Now, I was talking to someone last week who said they believe that the reason more Christians aren't as serious about living for God is because they have the wrong motive.

He said he believed the motive ought to be our own personal happiness. His take on things was, since serving God brings ultimate happiness in life if we really believed that to be true, we'd all serve God with our whole heart.

I want to propose to you that while it's true that ultimate joy comes from serving God, our own personal happiness isn't the best motive.

That's a motive that keeps the focus on us. And as long as we're focused on ourselves we're always going to fall short.

The best motive for serving God is grace.

So, what is grace? The Bible teaches that grace is God's absolutely unmerited, unearned, undeserved favor. It's God giving good to us that we could never hope to deserve or earn. God showed His grace in sending His only Son to die for us.

Romans 5:8 *God demonstrates His own love for us—His absolutely unmerited favor -- in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

You could actually define Grace this way: "Favor given when punishment is due."

That's why the Bible says : *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*

God's grace brings us salvation and then God continues to bestow His grace on us each and every day as He gives us other things we could never deserve or earn:

* His guidance in life-decisions * His forgiveness when we disobey Him. * His strength when we try to do His will. * His healing power when we are sick....and I could go on and on.

Grace is God's unmerited favor. God's grace is truly amazing.

What I'd like to do this week is to look at 4 basic characteristics of grace.

I. God's Grace Is Not New, It's Been a Part of His Plan From Eternity Past.

Turn to I Peter 1 pg 1076 Read vs 18-21

God is not a God of "plan b's." Often times in life we're not sure how things are going to work out so we make contingency plans. Just in case "plan a" flops we can pull out "plan b."

God has no "plan b's."

Isa 40:28 *Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the LORD, The Creator of the ends of the earth, Neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable.*

Some people believe that God tried out His laws on Israel and since they didn't work too well He switched over to "plan b" and sent Jesus.

Before the universe was even created God's plan included sending His Son to the cross. *He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world...*

Glimpses of grace can be seen all the way back in the Garden of Eden.

Turn to Gen 2 pg 4

Read 2:8 This area is actually what we call Iraq.

Read 2:15-17 There wasn't a whole lot of debate about what God's command was here. "Don't eat the fruit."

Read 3:1-7 Not only is God's command clear, but Adam and Eve clearly disobeyed that command. They ended up trying to hide from God.

Satan had told Eve her eyes would be opened but he hadn't told her what she'd see. Suddenly Adam and Eve saw their nakedness and everything else through the eyes of fallen sinners.

They did their best to cover themselves and human beings have been trying to cover up their guilty conscience ever since. We try religion, philosophy, education, morality, anything to cover ourselves before God, but now look over at verse 21. **Read 3:21**

Adam and Eve made loin cloths out of leaves but loin cloths weren't sufficient. God clothed them in animal skins, which means that God killed an animal.

God sacrificed an animal to cover two sinners.

There's a couple of implications here:

One is that clothing is Biblical. God doesn't want us walking around half naked. I'm always astounded how a handful of clothing designers can literally determine what each season's fashions are.

Talk about being sheep. We don't want to look out of place, so we buy into the fashion of the day.

Let me encourage you, don't let some clothing designer or marketing agency determine how you're going to look. Use biblical principles and biblical standards. You'll never be able to please everybody, but you can at least look nice without dressing sensually.

Let me just add this too: Dads, it's your responsibility to make sure that your daughters don't dress inappropriately. When your daughter walks out of the house dressed like Britney Spears there's a problem in your home and God holds you responsible.

You're the head of the house, and not only that but you know how men think. You know what's over the line. You're the key player here.

And moms, when dad gives godly direction and your daughter cries and begs, back your husband up. He's acting as that protective agent that God has called him to be. Enough said about that!

The second implication of Genesis 3:21 is God's grace. Adam disobeyed with impunity. The woman was deceived by Satan but Adam sinned by choice. He was impudent, audacious, and in-God's-face with his sin.

God, being the holy lawgiver could have killed Adam. Instead God killed an animal and covered Adam.

Here's grace in action. Mercy given when punishment was due.

This was God's plan from the beginning. He knew man would sin and then God would display His grace.

I. God's Grace Is Not New, It's Been a Part of His Plan From Eternity Past.

II. God's Grace Is Not Fair, It Is Just.

Turn to Romans 3 Pg 1001 Read vs 10 & 23

Adam's not the only one who's sinned with impunity. The Bible is clear that we all have sinned. *...there is not a just man on earth who does good And does not sin. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way...*

Listen to the Bible's explanation of the purpose and work of Jesus: *Christ also suffered for us...Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness--by whose stripes you were healed. So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him. And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. 3\ Then they said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck Him with their hands...Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led Him away. And He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha, where they crucified Him, and two others with Him, one on either side, and Jesus in the center.*

Now let me ask you, what's fair about that?

I've met so many people who have become angry with God because they suffered tragedy in their life. Some of the tragedies they've suffered have been absolutely horrendous. Your heart goes out to them when you hear what's happened to them.

They put it in different terms but in the end what they're saying is "it isn't fair." And their rationale goes something like this: God is supposed to be good, but He let something bad happen to me, so I can't believe He's good. I reject God because I don't perceive Him as fair.

Now, I can't always explain why God allows some of the things that go on in our world, but I know this. The greatest unfair action ever committed was when men, by wicked hands, crucified the sinless Son of God.

There's nothing fair about an innocent man being punished for someone else's crimes.

But here's the thing, Jesus Christ gave Himself. He said this: *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.*

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, willingly laid down His life for us sinners. The animal died so that Adam and Eve could be covered and Jesus, the Lamb of God died so that our sins could be covered.

That's not fair, but that's called grace.

Sometimes people will say, "I don't deserve this." Let me tell you. Be glad that you don't get what you deserve.

According to the Bible The wages of sin is death. Since we've all sinned, that's what we deserve. We deserve judgment. We deserve the wrath of God. We deserve punishment.

Instead of giving us what we deserve the Father gave the Son what we deserve.

Here's a challenge; find one other religion or faith in all of human history in which God pays for the sins of His people.

What makes Christianity different? Years ago that question was discussed at a conference. Some argued that Christianity is unique in teaching that God became man. No, other religions teach similar doctrines. What about the resurrection? No, other faiths believe that the dead rise again. The discussion grew heated.

C. S. Lewis, a strong defender of Christianity, came in late and asked what the discussion was about. When he learned that it was a debate about the uniqueness of Christianity, he immediately commented, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

How right he was! The very heart of the gospel is the supreme truth that God accepts us with no conditions whatever when we put our trust in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Although we are helplessly sinful, God in grace forgives us completely. It's by His infinite grace that we are saved, not by moral character, not by works of righteousness, not by commandment-keeping, not by faithful attendance at church.

Grace isn't fair but it's just. God is free to show us grace because He satisfied the demands of His own law. He didn't overlook our sin. He didn't sweep it under the carpet and push it aside. *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...*

I. God's Grace Is Not New, It's Been a Part of His Plan From Eternity Past.

II. God's Grace Is Not Fair, It Is Just.

III. God's Grace Is Not Limited

Turn to I John 2 pg 1082 Read 2:1-2

Propitiation means "atoning sacrifice."

How extensive is God's grace? It is big enough to wipe out the sins of the entire world. When John the Baptist saw Jesus approaching he said to all his listeners, *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*

God's grace is big....big enough to cover the sins of every human that has ever been born or ever will be born. And it is also so big that it is limitless in supply. God never runs out of grace. God doesn't give us a portion of grace when we become Christians and say, This is all you get....ration it out day by day...don't run out because when you do, there is no more....

He gives grace after grace after grace in unending supply. John 1:16, *And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.*

God's grace is unlimited. There is no sin that God's grace can't cover. Philip Yancey wrote a book he titled "What's So Amazing About Grace." In it he writes about what he calls the "scandal of grace." Grace frees the worst of sinners from the penalty of their sin.

Kip Ingram writes: When the famed theologian Karl Barth was once asked what he would have said to Hitler if he could have spoken to him, Barth said, "I would have asked him if he knew that Jesus Christ died for his sins." Part of me does not like that statement. First, it sounds a bit naive—there are many things that one could've said to Hitler about his politics and his attitudes. But more importantly, a part of me doesn't like it because I don't want to think of Hitler and grace together.

Hitler obviously didn't deserve it; he was a person capable of great evil and fostered horrific consequences for millions of people. It offends my sense of morality to think that Hitler could have known grace. Moreover, if we extend the possibility of grace to someone like him, aren't we giving up on the importance of moral judgment all together?"

If Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world then there can't be any limits on God's grace. There can't be people that are so bad that they can't be forgiven through Jesus' cross.

The scandal of grace is, that the worst sinner is forgiven if they trust Christ while the most moral, church going person is lost if they try to get to heaven by depending on their own morality.

Several years ago Frank Knipe led a Bible study in one of the prisons in Jessup. There were a number of guys in the study that wanted to be baptized and Frank asked me to hold the service.

I had been going to the Bible study there and knew that several of the men had trusted Christ as their Savior. They were seriously studying the Bible.

The night of the baptism, which we did in a bathtub, the men gave their testimonies. I had never once asked any of them what they had done and none had ever volunteered that information.

There were about a dozen men who shared how they had come to Christ. It turns out that every one of them had murdered at least one person. One young man had murdered three people in cold blood.

Several of the men wept as they spoke because now that they were believers they realized the full horror of what they had done.

Frank and I baptized them that night. I pushed on their head and Frank pushed on their knees to get them under the water in that bathtub. But I have to admit to you that was hard for me.

I love grace. I'm saved by grace. I preach grace. I have said and done things in my life that were despicable. I desperately need God's grace. But I still had a hard time putting my hands on the shoulder of a man who had taken a human life.

It was still hard for me to process the fact that God's grace is limitless. But the truth is, if God couldn't forgive those men, then I didn't stand a chance.

I. God's Grace Is Not New

II. God's Grace Is Not Fair

III. God's Grace Is Not Limited

IV. God's Grace Is Free

Turn to Ephesians 2 pg 1038 Read 2:8-9

You can't get any clearer than that!

Now to go along with Eph 2 **turn to Romans 11 pg 1007 Read 11:6**

I know that's a bit of a tongue twister but let's just park here for a minute. This is one of the most important concepts in the NT.

Grace means there's nothing we can do to earn it. If you add the smallest amount of works to grace it isn't grace anymore.

If you need to just do a little bit to be forgiven then God owes you.

Believe me God doesn't owe any of us a thing.

Salvation is a gift apart from any work. That's why I'm very careful what I say from this pulpit when it comes to the gospel.

Ac 20:24 The apostle Paul said *my ministry is to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*

1.) *The gospel isn't turn from your sins and come to Christ.* Turning from sin is a vital part of Christian growth but if you tell someone they have to turn from their sin and come to Christ you've added works. Remember, *if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace*

2.) *The gospel isn't give your life to Jesus.* Again, that's an essential part of our obedience as a Christian but it doesn't make us one.

3.) *The gospel isn't invite Christ into your life.* You won't find that anywhere in the NT.

4.) *The gospel isn't ask Jesus into your heart.* That's another phrase that's non-biblical.

You may think I'm being picky here, but were talking about the most important message in the whole world. If there's one thing that people need to hear clearly it's God's simple plan of salvation.

All the confusing messages out there are part of the reason so many people hope they're going to heaven but don't know for sure.

Salvation isn't walking to the front of a church, it isn't praying a prayer although both of those things can be involved in the process of coming to Christ.

What is it then? *It's by grace that you're saved through faith.* It's by trusting in Christ who died on the cross for your sins. It's renouncing any trust you have in your self or any one or any thing else, and trusting Jesus for your forgiveness.

Grace isn't something new. Grace isn't fair. Grace isn't limited. But here's what it is. For God it's costly, but for you it's free.

Have you come to that place in your spiritual life where you've recognized that you've sinned against a holy and righteous God, and the best you know how you've put your trust in Him alone for forgiveness?