

## Ready, Set, Go

Today, we're starting a new series because believe it or not, I'm tired of talking about sex. So, we're going to spend the next few weeks talking about the Gospel, which is even better! We're calling this series "Ready, Set, Go," because we want it to be a practical description of why the Gospel of Jesus matters to us and why it matters to the world. In the end, it's a series about evangelism, because in the fourth week, we're going to tell you about a new way we're going to do it at Waite Park.

But before we get into sharing our faith, I thought we needed to talk about exactly what is the gospel. And I want to do that because I think many people are confused about that question.

Here's the problem: For many years, Christians have been taught that the gospel is about getting people "saved," which means going to heaven when you die. And the way to do that is to believe something a set of propositions and if you say the magic words, then God will let you in.

Now, I realize that's a caricature that I'm sure no Christian would say they believe. But even though we wouldn't SAY it, that's how we think about the gospel because we believe being saved has nothing to do with how we actually live. Because of the way we articulate the gospel, there's a disconnect between going to heaven and how we live

here. How we live now has nothing to do with our eternity because believing in Jesus is the only thing that matters. After all, **“It’s by grace you’ve been saved through faith, not by works so that no one can boast.” (Eph 2:8-9)**

But here’s the dirty little secret—this really bugs us. We know followers of Jesus are supposed to live differently—because Jesus says it, and Paul says it, and James says it. But if salvation is by faith alone, we can’t figure out how to connect the two.

This was illustrated a few weeks ago I sent out an e-mail to some people to ask what questions people have about Christianity. This was one of the questions I received. *“Saving faith can be a confusing concept. Christianity often seems to promote the concept that if you say a genuine prayer at any point in your life, you're "saved" - a ticket to heaven - nearly regardless of what happens before or after that prayer.*

*To an outsider, this can seem like an odd thing for a "god" to agree to. Also, while one can point to some biblical passages that explicitly say that you're saved through faith / confession / believing that can't be earned through works, there are other much-less-spoken-of passages like James 2:14-26 which explicitly say that faith without deeds is dead. Does a dead faith still save a person?”*

Does anyone resonate with that question? Well, the reason we even have that question is that we misunderstand the crucial, Biblical concept of *“grace.”* Now, we love grace. We love to *sing* about Amazing Grace and *“Grace that will pardon and cleanse*

within.” We love grace. And we should. Grace is a great thing. But here’s how we misunderstand it.

For many years, the dominant metaphor for God’s grace has been the courtroom metaphor. We think of God as a righteous and holy, distant judge sitting behind his desk waiting to punish us for the crimes we’ve committed against him. At the moment of verdict, he declares us guilty and sentences us to death, but Jesus comes along and takes the punishment we deserve and we are set free. There’s nothing more to do, we’re free.

But while that is a metaphor used in the Bible, I would argue that this isn’t the primary way the Bible describes God. Instead of a distant judge, Jesus describes God as a loving father who wants to give us good things. But because we’re so influenced by the courtroom metaphor, we have a hard time seeing the gospel any other way. Well, today, I want you to see that the Bible shows us a different way. With that in mind, turn with me to 2 Corinthians, chapter 5. Just keep your thumb there and we’ll get there eventually, but before we do, I want to talk about the grace of God.

A couple years ago, a theologian named John Barclay wrote a book called “Paul and the Gift,” that I’ve heard a number of Bible scholars say is the most important book in Biblical studies in the last 50 years. It’s a 700-page book about grace. Rather than make you read it right now, I’ll give you a summary of what it says.

The New Testament word we translate as “grace” is the Greek word *charis*. *Charis* isn’t a theological word. It’s an everyday word. It’s the Greek word for “gift.” So, when we say grace is a free gift, that’s literally true—grace is gift. And Barclay says the reason we misunderstand *grace* is that modern, Western societies think differently about gift giving than ancient societies back then and even traditional societies today.

He says we believe there are certain factors that make a gift a perfect or “pure gift.” For instance, one of them is the *priority* of the gift. In other words, a pure gift isn’t given because someone demands or even asks for it. The giver takes the initiative and offers the gift without being prompted. A gift is pure, when it’s given freely.

A second factor is the *cost*. The more the gift cost the giver, the *purier* it is. We might enjoy it when someone gives us a trinket, but to find out that someone has saved up for months or really sacrificed to give us a gift can move us to tears.

A third factor is what Barclay calls *incongruity*. In other words, we consider a gift purer when it’s given without thinking about whether the person is worthy of the gift. We would say a gift is purer when it’s unmerited.

Now, Barclay says that the apostle Paul had all three of these ideas in mind when he described the grace of God. For instance, God took the initiative and offered grace *before* we asked for it. Romans 5:8 says, **“God showed his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

And he says the *lavishness* and *cost* of God's gift is incredible, so we see in Ephesians 2:7 that God showed us **"...the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."** Then in the next two verses, Paul says that God gives us the gift even when we don't deserve it. **"<sup>8</sup>For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup>not by works, so that no one can boast."**

So, when it comes to these three factors, we are in total agreement with Paul. But, Barclay says that modern westerners place another condition on a pure gift. In fact, for us, this is probably most important condition—that the gift is given *with no strings attached*. In fact, we're suspicious of people who give and expect something in return.

This is how we often think about charity. We believe *giving* money to someone in need is better than loaning money to them or paying them to do a job. So, when someone comes to the church in need of money, we believe the most loving thing to do is to give without expecting anything in return and send them on their way.

But this is where Barclay blew my mind and revolutionized how I thought about grace. He says that the idea of a gift given without strings attached is a modern, western idea that would have been completely foreign to the Apostle Paul. As a matter of fact, Paul would have thought just the opposite. Follow me here.

In Paul's day the purpose of a gift wasn't just to be nice, but a gift was intended to *establish a relationship*. If you gave someone money, your intent wasn't necessarily to receive money in return, but to receive thanks or loyalty or especially, friendship. To give a gift to someone meant that you wanted to be identified with them.

When I was in high school, I was pretty self-absorbed. Oblivious to many things, really. Well, I remember that there was a girl in my class—you could say we were friends—not super-close, but in the same friend group. Again, I was pretty oblivious to this, but apparently she kind of liked me because one day, when I had a basketball game, after school, she followed me out to my car with a single flower, with a note that said, "Good luck in your game today," and she signed it and she gave it to me personally.

Did I mention I was oblivious? I don't know why this sticks with me today, but I remember saying thanks, taking the flower, getting in my car, throwing it in the back seat and driving to the game. I also remember that I left the flower in the car in the winter and it froze and died.

Now, I didn't realize it at the time, but in hindsight I realize that by offering that flower, she intended to form a relationship. Looking back now, I realize how vulnerable she made herself and how completely insensitive and self-absorbed I was.

That flower is how Paul would have thought about God's grace. It's not given, just to be nice, but it's given to start a relationship. In Paul's day, people didn't just give gifts

indiscriminately, because they knew that whoever they gave a gift to, they were identifying with. They were selective because their gift-giving impacted the reputation.

When Paul talks says that God gives us the gift of grace, it means that he wants to *identify* with us. He gives grace, not just to set us free to go do what we want, but to form a relationship with us and to motivate our loyalty. We don't deserve the gift and there's no reason why God should want to be identified with us sinners.

You might say it this way: *God's gift of grace is unmerited, but it's not unconditional.* In fact, to accept the gift of grace and go on living without God is a slap to God's face. It's saying, "I'll take your gift, but I'm not interested in relationship." I just want to be friends with benefits.

Now, I want you to keep that picture in mind as we look at 2 Corinthians 5 through. Up to this point, Paul is defending his ministry to the church there, who isn't so sure about him. Some people have accused Paul of peddling the gospel for prestige or profit. But he responds by pointing out all the hardships he's endured for the gospel. And he basically says, "If I was only in it for the money or the "prestige" would I continue to do this?" No, there's something greater that motivates Paul. What is it?

Verse 14 he writes, "<sup>14</sup>**For Christ's love compels us...**" The reason he withstood hardship and persecution to share the gospel was that he was so taken by the riches of Christ's love that he couldn't do anything else.

We don't like the word "compelled." When you're compelled, you're not free. And we want to be free, because if it's not free, it's not real, right? Well, not exactly. N.T. Wright tells the story of a woman who won a three week all expenses paid trip around the world. But when the time came for her to take the trip, she decided to stay home to be with a friend who was about to undergo a critical and scary operation.

The local newspaper caught wind of this and came to interview her, because they were baffled about why anyone would forego an opportunity like that. Surely, the friend would understand. Surely, there's someone else who could stay with her.

But the woman answered, *"What none of you know is what she did for me three years ago. I was on drugs and couldn't stop. It got worse and worse. My family threw me out. She was the only person who looked after me. She sat up all night, again and again, and talked me through it. She cleaned up after me when I threw up, changed my clothes, took me to the hospital and made sure I didn't give up. She helped me through a court case and helped me get a job! She loved me when no one else would. So, did I have any choice? Now that she's sick, herself, it's the least I can do to stay with her."*

She felt compelled. Did that make her sacrifice less real? Not at all.

Paul said, Christ's love compels him. Now, I don't know about you, but this kind of makes me ashamed. It causes me to ask myself, what is it that motivates what I do? Am I more motivated by making money or achieving success or recognition than I am by the

incredible love of Jesus? Is the love of Christ so compelling for you that you can't help but to serve him first and foremost? How you answer that right now isn't your real answer.

The real answer is who you do with you time and money and your best energy?

Paul goes on. Christ love compels them, **“because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. <sup>15</sup>And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”** OK, now notice what it doesn't say. Verse 15 doesn't say, *“And he died for all that all may spend eternity in heaven.”* Is it true? Well, yes. But that's not what Paul says, because if we skip right to eternity, then Christ has nothing to say about the time between now and then.

So, what does Paul say is the result of Christ dying for us? *“that we should no longer live for ourselves, but for him who died for us and was raised again.”* Now, think about what he's saying. Paul is saying that Christ died for you so you will die to yourself and live for him. In other words, he gave each of us grace, not so we can throw it in the back seat of the car and let it die, so to speak. He gave each of us the gift of grace, to give us a new purpose and perspective on life.

What's this new perspective? Verse 16, **“<sup>16</sup>So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.”** What he's saying here is that when you die to yourself and begin to live for

Christ, you start to look at people differently. You no longer look at people from a worldly point of view.

This is what we do when we live for ourselves. We judge people's worth according to how the world judges—socio-economic status, race, gender. Are they cool? What can they offer us if we're seen with them or if we get in their group? But Paul says that to be "in Christ" is to find the love of Christ so compelling that we can't look at the world the same way anymore. We don't value the rich and ignore the poor. We don't despise "sinners," but we look through the mud to the masterpiece underneath. Why? Because God offers his unmerited grace to them, too!

This is such a complete transformation that Paul says that you become a new person. Verse 17, **"<sup>17</sup>Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"** We don't have to wait for eternity to start being transformed, we can live transformed lives right here and now! Do you want to know if you're really compelled by the love of Christ? What's your attitude toward people? But how much you are really compelled by Christ's love doesn't just show itself in your *attitude* toward people, but in your actions toward people.

Verse 18, **"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup>that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the**

message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup>We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

There! Do you see the Gospel message of grace right there? God was reconciling the world to himself. He was offering grace. Why? To start a relationship. Isn't that what reconciliation is? And you see all the signs of pure grace right there. God *initiated* it. He gave it even when we're not *worthy* of the gift. And the gift is lavish and costly—it cost him his very life to give to us. That's the gift! That's love! That's the gospel!

Now, I mentioned early in the message that this is a series about evangelism. Paul said that we are Christ's ambassadors as though God were making his appeal directly through us. But I have to be honest, there are probably many of us in this room that aren't particularly *compelled* by the love of Christ. And I think it's probably because we've either never really known or have forgotten that Christ died for you.

There's a famous story about John Wesley. Wesley was an Anglican priest who was sent to the U.S. as a missionary to the state of Georgia but not a very successful one. On the way to the U.S. a severe storm came up that threatened to break the ship apart. Wesley sat in the hull of the ship, terrified for his life. But at the same time, there was a

group of German Christians called Moravians who were singing hymns and didn't seem the least bit afraid—even the children.

When they made it to the U.S., Wesley went to one of them named August Spangenberg, still shaken from the storm. Wesley says this was their conversation, *“Spangenburg said, “My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?” I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” I paused, and said, “I know he is the Saviour of the world.” “True,” replied he; “but do you know he has saved you?” I answered, “I hope he has died to save me.” He only added, “Do you know yourself?” I said, “I do.” But I fear they were vain words.”*

It was only a few years later when Wesley was sitting in a Moravian Bible study and someone was reading the preface to Martin Luther's commentary on Romans, when he said he felt his “heart strangely warmed.” He writes that it was at that time, he did trust Christ for his salvation. And it changed everything! Through the work of Wesley, revival broke out in England. Thousands of people came to Christ. He was instrumental in the abolition of slavery in England. He shut down the distilleries in London where alcoholism was rampant all because the love of Christ compelled him. When Wesley finally got it, he didn't just sit around and study the Bible until he died, he was transformed!

In the next few weeks, we're going to talk about evangelism, but I'm convinced that none of us will ever be effective at it until we find Christ's love so compelling that it changes everything about us. But that transformation doesn't just compel us to share the gospel. It also transforms our marriages, our work, how we see people, how we spend our time. I don't believe we'll really understand the gospel until we understand what it means to die to ourselves so we can live for Christ.

So, I think many of us have some business to do today—to spend some time reconnecting with the grace of God that draws us into a renewed, ongoing relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. Many of us need to repent of the fact that we've been taking God's gift for granted and to ask the Holy Spirit to renew our relationship with God.

It might be that some of you in here have never accepted the grace of God, the forgiveness of your sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Maybe you need to do that and experience the relationship God is calling you into.