



I'm Still Growing:
"WHAT I'VE LEARNED ABOUT GRACE"

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Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Mark 2:13-17)

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? (Matthew 6:25-27)

Four years ago I visited St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England. While I was there I was able to visit one of my favorite paintings in one of the cathedral's side chapels. The painting is called "The Light of the World" by William Holman Hunt. It is a remarkable painting and was taken on a world tour for two years after it was completed. The painting shows Jesus at night, with the moon glowing behind his head, holding a lantern, preparing to knock on an overgrown and long-unopened door. I hope you'll go home and "google" it. Hunt said his painting illustrates the passage from John's Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."

Over one hundred years ago Hunt explained, "I painted the picture with what I thought, unworthy though I was, to be by Divine command, and not simply as a good Subject." He noted that the door in the painting has no handle, and can therefore be opened only from the inside, representing our "obstinately shut mind" and our resistance to the overtures of God. "Behold! I

stand at the door and knock!” Will we ever open that door which can only be opened from the inside?

I find the message of that painting illustrated in the brief episode we read from the Gospel as told by Mark. Jesus is found here knocking on the door of a wretched sinner. The scribes and Pharisees are shocked that Jesus would brazenly walk up to Levi sitting cozily in his tax booth and say to him, “Follow me!” And then Jesus has the gall to go to Levi’s home where many other “tax collectors and sinners” are gathered and breaks bread with them. Those who are trying to come to grips with the identity of Jesus, among them the righteous religious authorities of the time, are flabbergasted by this, and ask his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Why, indeed? We fully understand their confusion. Why does Jesus knock on Levi’s door—and ours? Tax collectors were the group most hated by their own people. They were traitors, employed by the hated Roman occupation forces, doing their bidding by extracting taxes for Rome. They were despised and distrusted. And then there were the “sinners.” Jesus hung out with those who were “*sinners*.” Sinners meant those who did not adhere to or practice the Law of the Jews. If the Pharisees comprised those who were “zealous” about keeping each and every law, those regarded as “sinners” were those who laughed and scoffed at such observances. Yet we see the grace of God in what Jesus did.

This morning I wish to speak to you about what I’ve learned about grace. And I’ve three lessons to pass on to you. The first comes in what we see in Mark: it is the idea of “Prevenient Grace.” Prevenient grace is the idea that God is seeking to find you before you even know about God. Grace is God working “ahead of you.” God takes the initiative to reach us. What we see in Mark’s story is God’s prevenient grace in action.

Some of you have never even heard of this term, although it is demonstrated throughout the Old and New Testaments. “Prevenient” is a word once commonly understood and which today is not often used. What does prevenient, or “preventing,” grace mean? It is that grace of God which *seeks* us out when we have never sought God and which reaches for us when we have turned our backs toward God. It is Christ knocking on our door before we ever know of him. Jesus embodied and exemplified this grace in all that he did. “I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners,” he said, thereby declaring that God’s grace is actively seeking not just a small group of righteous people, but everyone, including sinners. It is as John Wesley taught us: Grace is *in* all and *for* all. Sinners are not to be despised, Wesley tells us, rather they are like the sick who need a good physician. And we are *all* sinners. But before we even know our need, God is seeking to heal us through grace.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead tells of a wonderful experience in the life of Hugh Redwood that helps explain what prevenient grace is. Hugh Redwood was a much-sought-after lay preacher in England during his lifetime. He would often speak in churches and large public gatherings, and thousands of people would come to hear him.

At one period in his life, Hugh Redwood passed through a difficult time. He had some very hard decisions to make, and wasn’t sure what he should do. He asked God for guidance but it seemed

to him that God was keeping such counsel to Godself: the heavens were silent. One evening he went to have dinner with some friends before going on to address a large public meeting of several thousand people. When the meal was over, his hostess said to him, “Hugh, don’t wait around for the small talk; go upstairs to the study. There is a fire burning. Put your feet up and relax for a little while.” Redwood was glad for a little peace and quiet, so that is what he did. He found, as promised, that there was a cheery fire in the grate. He sat down on an easy chair and noticed that on the table beside the chair was a Bible. He picked it up and found that it was open at Psalm 59. He began to read, and when he came to Verse 10, he found the words, “The God of my mercy shall prevent me.”

Nowadays, if we “prevent” somebody, we mean that we stop them from doing something. If you are one of those who hold on to the King James translation of scripture, this is one of the words you come to and often fail to grasp. When the King James Version was produced, the word *prevent* meant “to go before.” To prevent someone was to go before them.

Redwood found that someone had already wrestled with how to understand this verse, for another something was written in the margin and found its way into Redwood’s consciousness with such power that he never forgot it. The anonymous hand had written, “My God, in loving kindness, shall meet me at every corner.” For Hugh Redwood, that translation was light in the darkness. It spoke to him that God could be trusted, because even when God could not be seen, God was already working, was already ahead of him preparing the way, and is already waiting for us to see what God has done.

That’s prevenient grace. Do you know what that can mean for us? It says that God is not only behind us in forgiveness, and with us as a loving, strengthening Presence; God is also out in front of us beckoning us into a future that is already filled with God’s goodness. In God’s loving kindness, God meets us at every corner of life. God goes before us, not in the negative sense of stopping us, but in the positive sense of empowering us in life.

Think of *Saul*, that Pharisee who was adamantly against the early Church and sought to stamp it out and kill Christ’s followers. He didn’t seek Christ, but *Christ* sought him. Saul set out to destroy the church in Damascus and a blinding light knocked him off his donkey and changed his life forever. That was prevenient grace. The grace that pursued Saul, transforming him into the Apostle Paul, was God’s “preventing,” “prevenient” grace. God sought Paul, and went ahead of Paul to offer him the possibility of new life.

Think of that wayward young pagan, the 5th-century philosopher named Augustine. He vehemently turned a deaf ear to Christ’s knock on the door, yet God still sought him. In the fifth century Augustine was one of the best educated, most brilliant people of his day. But he was a wild boy. He fathered a child out of wedlock and led a life of which many of his own time disapproved. He was not concerned about God. Yet, one day when he sat in the walled garden of a friend, he heard a group of young school children singing a school song as they walked by. They sang, “Tolle lege! Tolle lege!” which means “Take it and read! Take it and read!” Looking down, he found a copy of the scriptures, and in opening it he read these words from John: “Unless one is born from above, he will never enter the kingdom of God.” And brilliant, wild Augustine felt that those words were meant to speak personally to him, and he opened the door

of his heart to Jesus Christ. He joined the church and became a Bishop and sought in every way to communicate the truth of this God who sought him before ever he had sought God. Prevenient grace. God moving within our hearts before we turn to God, enabling us to turn to God.

I have learned a second lesson about grace. God's grace is a Grand Certainty that can fill us with confidence and hope. Grace works within us to heal the "Image of God" within us. This is to say, once we have opened the door to Christ, God seeks to remake us into the Image of Christ. Grace works to heal us, mature us, grow us until we become whole. John Wesley had an important insight in this. However you understand the "Fall" we read about in Genesis, Wesley observes that nowhere does it say that the Image of God in which we were created is destroyed. It is damaged, or as Wesley put it, the Imago Dei, the Image of God, is diseased. When we open the door to Christ's knock, God's grace works to heal and restore the image of God within us. This is not a one-time event. It is a lifelong process of growing into the shape of Christ, the perfect image of who God wishes us to be.

Our second Gospel reading today was from Matthew, that section we call the Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus is painting us his own picture of the grace-filled life toward which God is moving us. The image is of a life that is shaped by grace, not by fear. "Why do you worry?" Jesus asks. "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" You know the passage. If you allow yourself to be shaped by grace, that life will be yours.

One of my favorite preachers is Maurice Boyd. Dr. Boyd recalls a Scottish professor at his seminary who would constantly encourage his students with the words "Magnify Your Certainties!" These are wise words. Apart from grace, we tend to magnify our uncertainties and enlarge our fears and worries until they fill our entire consciousness. The poet Robert Burns once wrote that because we cannot see the future, we "guess and fear." We guess and fear instead of allowing ourselves to be moved to maturity in faith by God who loves us. "Magnify Your Certainties!" my friends, especially the certainty of God's love for you. For one truth of which we can be sure is that our journey into the future is already filled with God, who is waiting for us.

I have yet one more truth I've learned about grace which I need to share with you, as it's a lesson we almost always miss. God's grace seeks us, finds us, shapes us, but we also must take hold of that grace and use it. God works in cooperation with us, and never against our will. I'm sure you remember and have wrestled with how the Apostle Paul said, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling." Well, Wesley had an interesting way of paraphrasing Paul. Wesley said, "No one sins because he *has* not grace, but because he does not use the grace he has. Therefore, inasmuch as God works in you, you are now able to work out your own salvation."

God gives you and me grace. Yet it's up to you and me to use it. We cannot excuse ourselves by blaming other people, spiritual forces, or our own helplessness. God gives us grace to use. "No one sins because he or she does not have grace, but because they do not use the grace they have been given." *So work it out.* Work with the grace that God so freely gives you. *Use* that grace to find life—and to work for God's kingdom in the world.

Let me conclude with this story. Dr. Campbell Morgan was a preacher many years ago. One day he visited a member of his church and learned that she was to be evicted from her house because she couldn't pay the rent. That was on Saturday afternoon, so on Sunday Campbell Morgan told his congregation that he wanted enough money from them to pay the woman's rent. They responded gladly and generously through a special offering.

First thing on Monday morning he went to tell her the good news. He hammered on the door, but there was no answer. He continued to go from door to door, knocking hard, seeking to find her home, but he was disappointed. After trying the front door again, he left sadly. Sometime later he discovered that the woman had been at home all the time. She had been afraid to answer the door for fear that it was the landlord who had come for the rent, and all the time it was her pastor bringing her the help she needed.

Therein is our dilemma with God. We think God knocks upon our hearts to make a demand upon us. Yet what God is attempting to do is bring us a gift of blessing and grace. I must say to you that in this very moment, while you are listening to my voice, God is graciously offering that gift of grace to you. I'm still growing. But I can say this: we need only to open the door, trust in our God, and receive. For God's grace is ahead of us, seeking us, willing to grow us out of our anxiety and fear, and giving us strength to pursue Christ's path.

He stands at the door and knocks. Will you ever let him in?

May we pray?

"Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace, freely bestowed on all who believe.
You that are longing to see his face, will you this moment his grace receive?
Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that is greater than all our sin."

Gracious God, we thank you for how you reach out to us before we know you; that you forgive us before we ask; and that your grace is for all and in all. Give us the wisdom and courage to respond to your grace with faith and trust. Amen.