

Passing on God's grace

At the beginning of the year Andrew our vicar preached on "Receiving God's grace". The following Sunday Margaret Williams preached on "Living out God's grace". Today the subject I have been given, to complete a trilogy, is "Passing on God's grace".

I am not going to assume you were here for both those earlier sermons. So I will begin with a reminder of what grace is.

It has often been summed up in the mnemonic – God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Sometimes it has been defined as God's favour on us, or God's benevolence in action.

Grace is an all-embracing word for all the good that our wonderful God gives us, choosing us and calling us, giving us repentance, giving us faith to believe in the sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus on the Cross, on which he bore the punishment that our wrongdoings and sins deserve, and through which our sins are forgiven and forgotten, and through which we are reckoned righteous in God's sight, and through which we are born again, and through which we receive new and eternal life through the gift of his Holy Spirit coming to live in us, beginning the process of transforming us into his likeness now, enabling us to bear his fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, giving us his gifts with which to serve the Lord and his church, strengthening us against temptation, guiding us when we are confronted with problems, giving us his healing, and perfecting us after death, when we receive a new and perfect spiritual body, and a place with him in heaven, eternally. Wow – what a glorious list!

What gifts, what gifts! It is indeed amazing grace(as we shall sing at the end of the service). Praise the Lord! Alleluia!

Let us look at a few of the ways in which the Lord Jesus the Messiah himself treated others, passing on his grace.

When a man with an evil spirit interrupted Jesus, when he was preaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus passed on the grace of deliverance to him. (Mk. 1.21ff).

When Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, he passed on the grace of kindness in revealing himself to her as the Messiah. (John 4.4ff).

When a royal official went to Jesus and begged him to heal his son, Jesus passed on the grace of healing (John 4.43ff).

When a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery was brought to Jesus, he passed on the grace of forgiveness to her, rather than joining in the condemnation which the religious leaders expected. (John 8.1).

When his friend Lazarus died, Jesus passed on the grace of resurrection (John 11.1).

On the night before his crucifixion Jesus took the role of a household servant, washing the dusty feet of his disciples, passing on the grace of humility to them. (John 13.3ff)

Jesus passed on God's grace of reinstatement to Peter, whom he had appointed to lead the church on earth after he, Jesus, had returned to heaven. Yet Peter then denied that he knew Jesus three times, just before Jesus' crucifixion. After Jesus's resurrection he gave Peter a

threefold reinstatement “Feed my lambs ... take care of my sheep ... feed my sheep.” (John 21.15ff).

Some of the Lord Jesus’ parables illustrate aspects of his grace. Margaret referred to what is probably his best-known one, the parable of the lost son, who returned home to be met by an outpouring of his father’s welcoming grace of forgiveness and restoration.

Another well-known parable of Jesus also emphasises his grace of forgiveness: his story of the king and the two servants. The first servant owed the king a vast amount, which he could not pay, and the King forgave him the whole debt; that is a picture of God and us: there is a large amount for which we need God’s forgiveness, and when we repent he freely forgives us everything.

The second servant owed the first servant a small amount, but the first servant would not forgive him: that is a picture of us and our fellow men and women: anything they owe us is very small compared to all for which we need our heavenly Father to forgive us.

The king heard of the first servant’s failure to forgive, his lack of mercy, and the king commanded that that servant be put in prison and be tortured, until he paid back all he owed. Jesus concluded “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” (Mat.18.35).

We also need to remember the words of the Lord Jesus after he had given his followers his prayer to pray, including the words “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us”. (Mat. 6.12). He went on to say “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your father will not forgive your sins.” (6.14 –15).

Forgiving others is not an option; it is not just something to be done if we feel like it. I have to remind myself of that from time to time.

We need to have forgiveness in our heart for anyone who has done us wrong or failed to do us right. Jesus said that if we do not forgive we will not be forgiven, we will not receive his grace of forgiveness.

The grace of forgiveness is the heart of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

Jesus even gave forgiveness to the thief who was crucified alongside him, and who admitted that he was getting what his deeds deserved. (Luke 23.43).

Then before Jesus ascended into heaven he told his followers “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1.8). The Holy Spirit would give them grace to pass on Jesus’ grace.

The first to receive grace from Jesus and to respond to it were Jewish men and women, as we learn time and again from the opening chapters of the book of Acts. But, when Jewish believers were scattered from Jerusalem because of persecution, we read in Acts chapter 11 “Some of them... went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

When he (Barnabas) arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.” (Acts 11.19 to 23).

Likewise on the apostle Paul’s first missionary journey, with the apostle Barnabas, at the town of Iconium, which is somewhere in southern Turkey today, “Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.” (Acts 14.3).

Later Paul wrote, in his second letter to the Christians at Corinth, that he and his companions were sharing the gospel “So that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.” (2 Cor. 4.15). Indeed they were passing on God’s grace; that is our focus today. Grace is not just meant to be received, not just to be received and lived out, but received, lived out, and passed on. That was what Paul and others were doing.

So, as Paul wrote in the next chapter in 2 Corinthians, “We try to persuade men. ... For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all ... 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.” (5.11, 14-15).

Paul continued “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 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.” (5.18-20).

It is impossible to read these words and to hear these words without sensing the urgency of the message.

Indeed Paul goes on “As God’s fellow-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. For God says ‘in the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you’. That is a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 49 verse 8. Paul goes on “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favour, now is the day of salvation.” (2 Cor. 6.1-2).

In his farewell to the elders of the church of Ephesus, we read in Acts 20 that Paul said “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.” (Acts 20. 24).

Later in the same address he said “Now I commit you to God and the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance” (21. 32).

So, as we heard, we are to be “Christ’s ambassadors”, on behalf of Christ passing on the message of his grace, and encouraging people to be reconciled to God and to receive his grace.

Christ’s love should compel us, just as it compelled Paul. We are to pass on Christ’s grace.

We are to implore others, on Christ’s behalf, just as Paul did, to receive the Lord’s love and forgiveness and “Be reconciled to God.” (2 Cor. 5.20). “Be reconciled to God.”

We need to be praying for opportunities to do so. You don’t have to be a preacher to tell people that God loves them and will forgive every sin, because Jesus paid the price for us when he gave his life for us on the Cross.

Even receiving a simple enquiry like “How are you?” can be turned into an opportunity. Your reply could be “I’m fine, thanks to God for good health”. Or it could be “Well, not as well as I would like, but I’m grateful to God for his help.” Or it could be, if, like me, you are getting on in years, I’m looking forward to the new body God is going to give me in heaven.” Any such reply could continue “How are you?” and trust the Holy Spirit to guide your conversation, taking it on from there. Give a bit more detail about God’s help for you.

If they mention a particular need you could ask if they would like you to pray for them. Next time you meet don’t forget to ask whether they have seen answers to these prayers yet.

There are some people for whom I have been praying for a long time, that they would find Jesus. I have not got that many years left on the earth and I ask myself – shouldn’t I be working out ways to take the initiative in sharing the gospel, rather than going on waiting until people give me an opportunity to speak to them of Jesus?

I am part way through drafting a letter which I will place with my funeral wishes. A letter saying goodbye to those with whom I have never managed to share the gospel, and apologising for not doing so, and enclosing a booklet like “Why Jesus”, and a list of people to whom my executors are to send it.

But, if you’re younger, you will not be thinking of doing something like that just yet.

What about you? When someone asks “How are you”? what could you reply which could lead on to you say something about God, witnessing about Jesus, as he tells us the Holy Spirit will give us power and guidance in doing so? I leave you to work that one out for yourself – some words you feel you could use.

Jesus said “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth”. (Acts 1.8).