

Grace: Free, Costly, & Surprising

Luke 13:22-30

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Will only a few be saved?

Jesus doesn't actually answer the question. Commentators say that in this story he refuses to be drawn into a theoretical question.

Which was a live question in Jesus' religious world. There was disagreement within Judaism as to which people were included in God's covenant. Some took a very restrictive view that only those who strictly abided by certain ethical codes were the true children of God. Some thought the covenant was based upon ethnicity, in particular that all Jews were included automatically and non-Jews were either excluded or had extra work to do. But some Jewish thinkers tended to a broader view that anyone was welcome into covenant with God.

That debate continued into the early Christian movement. Read Acts or Galatians and you see evidence of the struggle. Did non-Jews need to be circumcised in order to become Christians? Should Christians keep kosher, was that a requirement? Could Ethiopian eunuchs or Roman soldiers be a part of the Jesus movement?

St. Paul's letter to the Romans was fixated on this topic, particularly on the relationship between Jews and non-Jews after the revelation of God in Jesus. Paul wrestled with the topic, writing about what it meant to be justified by God. The great Paul scholar Bishop N. T. Wright has written, "Justification is not just about 'how I get my sins forgiven.' It is about how God creates, in the Messiah Jesus and in the power of his Spirit, a single family . . . through whom [God's] purposes can now be extended into the wider world."

So, asking Jesus his view on a hot theological topic seems okay.

But, as I said, Jesus didn't answer the question.

Writes Brendan Byrne, "But Jesus will not respond to speculations in these terms. Instead, he turns the question back once more into a warning not to miss the opportunity while it is still available." And Luke Timothy Johnson says, "Jesus turn[s] a theoretical question into an existential challenge."

The challenge, the opportunity is a reminder that we have been invited into God's hospitality. Are we going to respond? For you sure don't want to show up late to the party.

Because our congregation emphasizes a broad welcome and radical inclusion, we might be troubled by a passage which seems to exclude and narrow the hospitality of God. But does this story do that? I'm not so sure. Notice verse 29 "Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God." That's pretty inclusive, and draws upon an image in the prophets of all nations streaming unto Jerusalem when God's reign begins in fullness.

Let's take this opportunity, then to look more carefully at the grace of God. In this discussion I will be guided by theologian Patrick Cheng in his book *From Sin to Amazing Grace*. Cheng proclaims that God's grace is three things—it is free, it is costly, and it is surprising.

First, God's grace is free.

There is no limit to the love and welcome of God. God offers salvation and healing to all creation in hopes that every one and every thing will be included in the family of God. And that grace is freely given. Grace is God's gift to us. We do nothing to earn grace. We enjoy no privilege or status or special honor due to our nationality, our race, our sexual orientation, even our behavior. Nothing earns us more of God's love. God loves the most wicked of humans as much as God loves the gentlest saints among us. There is no more freeing, more liberating, more healing message than this core truth of the Gospel.

So, is the Gospel contradicted by saying that grace is also costly? The term "Costly Grace" comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A moment ago we heard an excerpt from the opening chapter of his monumental work *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer was lamenting one of the greatest failures in the history of Christianity—the connection between the Nazi government and the established Protestant churches of Germany. Bonhoeffer, and others like Karl Barth, believed that this failure on the part of the established churches resulted from a weak theology. The churches had come to believe that God's grace expected nothing of them and so they had cheapened it. Grace may be free, but grace is not cheap.

While pastoring in Oklahoma City I heard a phrase that expressed this idea most succinctly—"God loves you just the way you are and so much not to let you stay that way." And we get this. We love our children unconditionally but we also love them so much that we want them to become their best selves. We want them to learn and grow and develop.

Bonhoeffer's point is that God's grace should evoke in us a response of gratitude and praise that gives rise to a desire to follow Jesus, which is a demanding ethics. Patrick Cheng writes, "Even though grace is a free gift from God, [grace] still demands that we be transformed by it."

And grace is surprising, precisely because grace can transform us.

John Newton, the composer of the hymn "Amazing Grace" had been a slave trader before his own transformation into an Anglican priest and ultimately an abolitionist. Patrick Cheng writes, "The implicit message of Newton's hymn is that if a slave trader can become an Anglican priest through the amazing power of God's grace, then all of us can be transformed."

Will you let grace change you?

Growing up a Southern Baptist in Oklahoma our worship was routinely focused on such a question. In particular our hymns were invitations to receive God's saving grace and be transformed.

If you'll take one step t'ward the Savior, my friend,
You'll find his arms open wide;
Receive him, and all of your darkness will end,
Within your heart he'll abide.

Time after time he has waited before,

And now he is waiting again
To see if you're willing to open the door,
Oh, how he wants to come in.

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
Calling for you and for me;
See, on the portals he's waiting and watching,
Watching for you and for me.

Come home, come home,
Ye who are weary come home;
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,
Calling, O sinner, come home!

In our worship the invitation may be less direct, but, hopefully, no less real. Particularly during communion we invite everyone to receive the gifts of God and to respond by becoming part of the people of God.

While we offer God's free grace, let us not become lazy, for God's grace is not cheap. Grace can and will transform us if we commit our lives to follow Jesus, living as he taught us.

The question, then, isn't whether few or all will be saved. The question, as Jesus rightly points out is, will you take the opportunity to respond? Will you receive the hospitality of God and be transformed?