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The Impulses of Grace, Part 2

Grace Defined

When we think of grace, we typically think of the unmerited favor of Christ whereby the sinner is forgiven all his sin and so made a child of the living God. Truly, grace is getting what we don't deserve.

And that is why we are not surprised to read that in all that God is doing in this world He is parading His grace before us that all might bow and worship:

Ephesians 1:5-6a, "He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace..."

And yet, God's grace must NOT be for us a theological concept void of any real significance in our lives. Truly, God's grace must impel us in ministry. It must move us to do and to be that which under normal circumstances we wouldn't! Otherwise we risk taking God's grace in vain.

2 Corinthians 6:1, 3: Paul exhorted the Corinthians, "And working together *with Him*, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... giving no cause for offense in anything, in order that the ministry be not discredited."

Cheap grace is that which brings the child of God to an appreciation for the cross of Christ and yet never affects them. Indeed! Grace must move us as children of God- the way it moved Paul:

2 Corinthians 8:9-10, “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain [it wasn’t cheap]; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.”

Paul was saved by grace and that grace impelled him to labor tirelessly for the gospel. We see it in Stephen:

Acts 6:8, “And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.”

What is it that led Stephen to such a bold and powerful witness? The grace of God! In fact that is how God brings about our sanctification, He moves us by grace!

2 Corinthians 9:8: “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed.

Truly, grace is that which once realized gets a hold of the child of God and moves him, impels him, drives him! And we see this in our text.

As you know Paul is mediating a conflict between two men: Philemon and Onesimus. The text indicates that Onesimus at one time was a slave of Philemon.¹ Yet he escaped, and in the process damaged Philemon’s property and stole some of his money.² Coming to Rome, Onesimus heard the gospel under Paul, was converted, and then disciplined. Because Onesimus and Philemon were now brothers at odds, Paul knew that he had to send Onesimus back that the two men might be reconciled. Yet Paul did not send the runaway back empty handed. He sent along with him the epistle in our hands, an epistle in which Paul sought to secure the forgiveness and restoration of Onesimus.

And thus, the book of Philemon is an epistle about redemption, forgiveness, and grace! It was by grace that

- Philemon was saved.
- He attained the position he enjoyed as a servant of the body of Christ in Colossae.
- Onesimus his slave had become a child of God and so became Philemon’s brother.
- Philemon must accept him back... not as a slave, but as a co-heir of grace.

In fact, this grace is beautifully portrayed in Philemon.

Philemon 17-19a: though spoken by Paul, nevertheless it proclaims most vividly the grace of Christ on our behalf at the cross, “If then you regard me a partner, accept him as *you would* me. But if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account... I will repay it.”

Truly this is the high point of this epistle- the climax. It is from this that Paul pens his closing remarks to Philemon.

¹ Compare Philemon 16

² Compare Philemon 18-19

And herein lies my thesis: Paul is wrapping up his letter to Philemon not as a man performing the perfunctory close demanded by the social confines of his day, but rather as we have seen, the Apostle has just been on a mountain top, a mountain top of grace, which has compelled him to close this epistle the way he does; thus we have here what I have called, “A catalog of The Impulses of Grace!”

Obedience

Now, last time we beheld the first Impulse; Obedience. Now unlike last time where I spent the majority of time showing the link between grace and obedience in Scripture, I am going to assume the link as we consider the remaining three impulses.

Fellowship

Philemon 1:22, “At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.”

Recall that Paul is imprisoned in Rome on account of the gospel. Now at first Paul’s imprisonment looked bleak, such that he wrote to the Philippians:

Philippians 1:19-21: “For I know [this was his hope] that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but *that* with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death [now this was more akin to reality; truly at the writing of Philippians, Paul wasn’t sure if he’d make it out of prison alive]. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

The way things looked at first roused thoughts in Paul that maybe he wouldn’t live past his imprisonment. Yet by the time of the writing of this epistle (which was shortly after Philippians, maybe a year) things looked much better such that Paul in our text anticipated being released soon. And that’s exactly what happened. Around 61 AD Paul was released from his Roman imprisonment.

As a free man, Paul visited Crete and so Asia Minor.³ Most scholars believe that it was at this time he made good on his desire to stay with Philemon! While in Asia Minor he left Timothy behind in Ephesus⁴ and then went on to Macedonia. There he visited Troas, Corinth, and Miletus.⁵ Paul then was arrested around 63 AD and executed either prior to the Neronian persecution of 64 AD or shortly thereafter.⁶

In our text, Paul is on the verge of all of this, sensing that he soon would be released. And thus he expressed the strong desire to come to Colossae and stay with Philemon, “...prepare me a lodging; for I hope that through your prayers I shall be given to you.”

Now the question we raise in this context is, “What purpose did Paul have in coming to Colossae and staying with Philemon?”

³ Compare Titus 1:5

⁴ Compare 1 Timothy 1:3

⁵ Compare 2 Timothy 4:13-20

⁶ Since it is difficult to believe that Paul would have urged Timothy and Mark to come to him (2 Timothy 4:9, 11, 21) during the great Neronian persecution in A.D. 64, it is likely that he was martyred either before it, around A.D. 63, or after it, around A.D. 65 (perhaps even as late as A.D. 67, the last year of Nero’s reign).

Some commentaries suggest that Paul *threatened* a visit to Philemon for the purpose of accountability. Philemon must know that whatever he decides in the matter of Onesimus, someday soon he would have to face Paul. And no doubt implicit in a visit from Paul there would be a level of accountability. But that's not the main reason. For this we turn to Philippians 1:8-11.

Philippians 1:8-11 was written prior to Philemon, yet close in time. Notice Paul's heartbeat:

Philippians 1:8-11, "For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus... [Just as in Paul's relationship with Philemon, Paul longed to be with the Philippians. Why? It is revealed in the content of his prayer...] And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which *comes* through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

Paul longed to be with the Philippians that he might encourage them, grow them, and so strengthen them in the faith. In fact, that is why Paul longed to be with any church or Christian in his day. Truly the theme of Paul "longing to be with certain churches and people" is a common one in Scripture.⁷

Yet we must see that when Paul longed to be with a Christian or a church body, it wasn't so that he could vacation with them and have fun. Rather it was so that he might invest in them and so build them up in Christ. We see this in his relationship with the Romans.

Romans 1:11-12, "For I long to see you [not so that he could vacation amongst them, but that] ...I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you *while* among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine."

Why did Paul long to see any Christian?

He longed to see them such that together they might be used by God to build each other up and so encourage each other in the faith.

Do you see it? Paul longed to see them that he might fellowship with them! In fact, this is the charter for all church get-togethers:

Hebrews 10:24-25, "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds [how is this to be done?], not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near."

We forsake the body NOT only when we miss church, BUT also when we attend and yet do not stimulate one another on to love and good deeds! Truly when the church gathers for any reason, chief in our minds and hearts must be the edification and building up of each other!

And that's why Paul asked Philemon to prepare for him lodging! He wanted to be there to

- Pray with him.
- Worship beside him.

⁷ Compare Romans 1:11, Philippians 4:1, 1 Thessalonians 3:6, and 1 Timothy 3:14

- Exhort him in the Lord.
- Walk with him.
- *Summarized...* TO FELLOWSHIP WITH HIM!

And where did this desire come from?

Don't miss it family of God, this desire is the second impulse of grace! Again, Paul in this epistle has been gazing upon the transforming grace of God that

- Turns slaves into sons.
- Enemies into friends.

And what passion did this inspire in Paul as he considered Philemon? It gave Paul the passion to fellowship with Philemon.

That is the second Impulse of Grace: Fellowship!

Now if you lack this vision/passion, as I mentioned last time, it could very well be that you aren't saved. Gathering together with a group of people and spending time fellowshiping would amount to purgatory to the nonbeliever. *What a horrid way to spend an evening or a day.* Thus if you find that you would rather go it alone and not be with the body of Christ, again that could indicate that you are void of grace in your life.

Yet in the body of Christ today I rather think that a lack of passion for fellowship reflects more a misunderstanding of grace and a lack of submission to grace than anything else. Toward that end, let me help you see that God did not operate grace in your life so that you might

- Go home, close the blinds, lock the door, and then do your own thing.
- Be freed to do whatever you please.

Rather, God saved you to be a vehicle through which the body of Christ might be built up and established in grace. What spiritual gift has God given that is not intended for the body of Christ?⁸ According to Romans 15, God plants "strong" Christians in the body of Christ so that they might, "...please his neighbor for his good, to his edification" (Romans 15:2). The ethical end of all love is according to 1 Corinthians 8:1, the edification of the body of Christ! The proper use of our tongue is this: speaking, "...only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29). Truly God has blessed you with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that you might extend this grace and so enjoy this grace amongst the body of Jesus Christ.

If you are going to respond positively to the grace of Christ, this is what you will become: one who hungers and thirsts for fellowship.⁹

⁸ Compare also 1 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Peter. 4:11-12

⁹ In fact, do you know what by definition a zombie is in the body of Jesus Christ- you know, the living dead? Someone who takes the grace of God in vain and so lives for wanton pleasure!

1 Timothy 5:6, "But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives."

Sadly today, the church is filled with zombies! They don't understand grace; they've forgotten grace; they're not living by grace. And so they wander around in a fog not realizing that the greatest blessing in the world as a child of God is being used by God to extend grace to another individual unto their maturation in Christ!

Love

This brings us to another impulse, the expression of love.

Philemon 1:23-24, “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.”

This is quite the list. Most of these men were pillars in the early church and are here mentioned as ones who knew Philemon personally. Colossians 4:10-14 contains a similar list of those with Paul who sent their greeting to the church in Colossae. There are differences when the list of names is compared with our text. And those differences are believed to be due to the fact that Paul only mentions those whom Philemon knew here.

Well who were these men who made it a point to send along their greeting to Philemon?

Epaphras

Epaphras was one of Paul’s friends and associates, referenced by Paul as his “fellow slave” and “fellow prisoner.”¹⁰ From the Biblical evidence¹¹ we know that Epaphras evangelized the cities of the Lycus valley in Phrygia under Paul’s direction while the Apostle was ministering in Ephesus. As such, Epaphras is given credit as having founded the churches of Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea. In other words, Epaphras was Philemon’s pastor!

At the writing of Philemon, Epaphras was present with Paul. In fact it was during this visit that Epaphras shared news of the condition of the churches in the Lycus valley which prompted Paul to pen Colossians.

Mark

This was John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas and author of the Gospel of Mark! His defection during Paul’s first missionary journey¹² led to a falling out between Paul and Barnabas.¹³

Yet by now Mark was a changed man. Through the discipline imposed by Paul, and through the tutelage of Peter¹⁴ and Barnabas, Mark had come to spiritual maturity. In fact, so valuable had he become to Paul that the apostle asked for him shortly before his death.¹⁵

Aristarchus

3 John 4, “I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.”

Truly an Impulse of Grace is the desire for fellowship- both giving it and receiving it. Live by grace and you will find yourself longing to impart this grace into the lives of others.

¹⁰ Compare Colossians 1:17; 4:12; Philemon 23

¹¹ Compare Colossians 1:7

¹² Compare Acts 13:13

¹³ Compare Acts 15:36-39

¹⁴ Compare 1 Peter. 5:13

¹⁵ Compare 2 Timothy 4:11

Aristarchus was a Jewish believer¹⁶ and a native of Thessalonica.¹⁷

He had a long association with Paul, and had been through some rough times with him. In Acts 19:29, he is Paul's "travelling companion" when he was seized with Paul by the Ephesian mob. In Acts 20:4 he accompanied Paul to Jerusalem, probably as an official Thessalonian delegate with the collection. In Acts 27:2, 4 he is on Paul's ship from Caesarea which ended in shipwreck.

At some point in Paul's Roman imprisonment, he rejoined the apostle and became his "fellow prisoner"¹⁸ (Colossians 4:10), possibly alternating with Epaphras in voluntary imprisonment.

According to tradition, he was martyred in Rome during the persecutions under Nero.

Demas

Demas was the only dud! Not much is known about this man except that at the writing of our epistle, he was a co-worker with Paul. Later he apostatized. In fact, Paul wrote of him, "Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me" (2 Timothy 4:10). This tells us that it wasn't cowardice that took Demas to Thessalonica, but worldliness.

Yet at the time of Philemon, this man was counted as one of Paul's fellow-prisoners and fellow-workers.

Luke

Paul identified this man as, "the beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14). He was a Gentile Christian doctor and the author of the Gospel of Luke and Acts. He was both a frequent traveling companion of Paul and a faithful and loyal friend. In fact, he alone was with Paul in his final days.¹⁹

Greeting

Now as we gaze upon this list of names we are struck by the fact that all, except one, were serious servants of the Lord Jesus who were willing to suffer much for His sake. In other words, they weren't careless people who, when Paul penned Philemon, walked by and said, "You're writing to Philemon? Give him my best!" Rather an expression like the one referenced in our text would have meant far more. As writers of Scripture, church planters, pastors, and martyrs a greeting from them would have been taken as a strong endorsement and expression of love. For that is what a "greeting" in the early church represented.

In fact, notice four characteristics of the early church greeting.

1. It was an expression which reflected a longing for an individual or household to know the peace of God.

Matthew 10:12-13, "And as you enter the house, give it your greeting. And if the house is worthy, let your *greeting of peace* come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your *greeting of peace* return to you."

¹⁶ Compare Colossians 4:11

¹⁷ Compare Acts 20:4; 27:2

¹⁸ Compare Colossians 4:10-2; Philemon 23-24

¹⁹ Compare 2 Timothy 4:11

Truly the “greeting” referenced in our text was far more than a polite vocal sound, but a longing on the part of these men for God’s riches blessings to rest on Philemon.

2. In fact, it was a *purposed* and *mindful* hope that the riches of God’s kingdom might be enjoyed—we see this reflected in the fact that the early church adopted a change in the typical greeting of their day. Amongst the Romans of Paul’s day, the typical way to begin a correspondence was, “Greetings!” Yet Paul deliberately diverged from this and instead wrote, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”²⁰ In our examination of this expression in the past we’ve seen that such a sentiment represented a deliberate wish on the part of Paul for the believers. And so it was when a Christian greeted another in the early church.

And thus when these men to extend their “greeting” to Philemon we conclude that they were doing far more than just saying, “Hi!” They were expressing a genuine longing for Philemon to know God’s grace and the resulting peace! We can presume nothing less on the part of these men here!

3. In 2 John we learn that the Christian “greeting” of the early church also involved an endorsement, and so an expression of approval.

2 John 10-11, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into *your* house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.”

4. Finally, throughout the New Testament the Christian “greeting” more often than not involved a holy kiss on no less than five separate occasions²¹ we read this:

Romans 16:16a: “Greet one another with a holy kiss.”

From all of this we conclude that the “greeting” conveyed by the men referenced here was nothing less than an expression of love by which they longed and prayed for God’s richest blessings to rest on Philemon. As it was offered here not by thoughtless individuals, but some of the more committed servants in Christ’s kingdom at the time, we understand that our text reflects a strong sentiment of love, devotion, and endorsement. In other words, Paul here is saying, “Philemon! It just isn’t me pulling for you here. It is Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke! All of us love you and long to see you fulfill your calling!”

Such is a third impulse of Grace. When grace takes a hold of an individual, they are prompted by love and so long for the blessing of God to rest on those around them.

You say, how is this any different from fellowship, the second impulse referenced here?

- Philemon 22 reflects the *intention* to encourage another person in their walk with Christ.
- Philemon 23-24 reflects the *passion* and so the love.
- It is one thing to find yourself in a setting of fellowship and so engage another person. Most in the body of Christ would do this. But it is quite another to long to participate in this when you

²⁰ Compare Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; Philemon 3

²¹ Romans 16:16a; 1 Corinthians 16:20b; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14.

are away from the body and involved in your own thing.

- The first is the *activity* prompted by grace. The latter is the *passion*.

And it is this passion which is so lacking today. We truly are lone-ranger Christians. We are happy to be involved in a successful church body, but we cringe when ministry expects something of us during the week. And if we should be moved to think about brothers and sisters in the Lord mid-week, so often what we think is how they have let us down.

You want to know what it will look like if you grow in the grace of God? Not only will you count obedience a delight and you will regularly participate in the fellowship of the body of Christ but you will find yourself longing to build up, bless, and so love the body. This will become a growing passion in your life that will consume you when you are away from the body.

The Conquest of Grace in the Life of Others

Philemon 1:25, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

What a fitting close to an incredible epistle. Everything that Paul has taught in this letter is summarized in this simple statement: "Philippians, live by grace!" Live out the gospel. Live in light of God's favor. Come to know the heart of God who having fulfilled all righteousness poured His favor out on ones undeserving of His love.

That is what grace is all about. And that is the final message that Paul gives in this epistle to Philemon and the church meeting in his house.

Now you must see that this message is in stark contrast to the sentiment that typically ended secular letters in Rome at this time. Do you know what that message was?

According to the conventions of Paul's day it was, *ε[ρρωσθε (erros~~the~~)*- which translated means, "Be strong!" How ironic!

The message of the Greco-Roman world [our current world] was/is

- Be Strong
- Exalt in the labors of your hands
- Know yourself.
- Be a leader.
- Be self-sufficient.
- Live for glory.

The message of Grace is

- Be weak; so that you might know the strength.
- Exalt only in Christ!
- Know your God!
- Be a servant!
- Rely upon Christ alone!

- Live for the glory of God!

What a contrast! Rome said, “Be strong!” Yet Paul closed- and for that matter, began²² this and all his letters²³ with a call for God’s people to be men and women of grace- and thus to

- Glory in their humiliation.
- Exalt in their weakness.
- Be as nothing that Christ might be everything!

This is such an important exhortation. See Paul knew that we are prone to forget this. Our stiff and hard hearts often abandon the grace of God for the labors of our own hands and the message, “Be strong!” And that is why Paul just didn’t want Philemon to know grace, but that grace would be that which took control of his person and so moved him in all that he did. Notice the text again:

Philemon 1:25, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

This is a rather peculiar expression. We’d expect Paul to long for God’s grace to be with Philemon, but with his spirit?” What does that denote?

This denotes nothing less than that Philemon would be moved from the inside out to

- Live God’s grace.
- Express God’s grace.
- Rely upon God’s grace.
- Herald God’s grace.
- BE A MAN OF GRACE!

Truly, Paul’s closing appeal in this epistle of grace was for the Conquest of Grace in the life of Philemon. It wasn’t simply that Philemon would be saved by grace, but that he’d live by it!

And that raises these questions:

- What is it that you are longing for in life?
- What is it that you are living for?
- What is it that occupies your time the most?

Sadly today, most Christian’s concerns parallel that of most pagans in the US:

- Our jobs.
- Our future.
- Tomorrow.
- Our finances.
- Our boredom.
- Our health.
- Our popularity.

²² Compare Philemon 1:3

²³ e.g., Romans 16:20; 1 Corinthians 16:23; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Gal. 6:18; Ephesians 6:24; Philippians 4:23; Colossians 4:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:18; 1 Timothy 6:21; 2 Timothy 4:22; Titus 3:5.

- Our position.
- Our power.
- Our entertainment.

Compare that to the passion to which grace will lead if you live by it.

- Longing to obey the Lord out of love and gratitude.
- Actively engaging the body of Christ that it might grow in its love for the Lord.
- Being preoccupied for the welfare of the body of Christ
 - Loving it.
 - Praying for it.
 - Weeping over it.
 - Longing for it.
 - Longing to see- as one of your greatest hopes- one another being enveloped and so controlled by grace!

Now this is “law” family of God. But to the one living by grace it is not burden, but inspiration this is where you and I want to be. This is what you and I want to embody. This constitutes the marching orders of a God who loves you and is well-pleased with you.

Accordingly, this represents what maturation will look like as you become the man or woman that God has called you to be. Don’t fight it; embrace it; and let’s hold each other accountable for it!

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on February 1, 2009. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.