

## Lighten Up: The Joyful Truth About Sin and Grace

Week 6: Do We Need Grace?

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April 3, 2022

2 Cor 5

<sup>16</sup> From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know [Christ] no longer in that way. <sup>17</sup> So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. <sup>20</sup> So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making an appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> For our sake [God] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God.

*Do you need Jesus? Do we need Jesus? Today? Any day?*

That's a question that'll make you pause and wonder if you're in a Baptist church, not a progressive Presbyterian one. But it's the question that I want to ask today. *Do we need Jesus?*

Over the last century, folks have been doing working to reform Christian theology—to re-write the harmful teachings that infected our tradition: biblical literalism, human depravity, substitutionary atonement. We've been trying, together, to save Jesus. Liberation theology restored Jesus' own sense that human freedom and justice belong to God's saving work. Black theologians, feminist theologians, postcolonial theologians have decentered pink-skinned, male, European-ness as the norm. They have aligned the Jesus movement with the struggle against racism, sexism, and economic exploitation. Queer theology asks us look again at sex as part of our created goodness and has raised provocative questions about Jesus' own sex and gender identity. Process theology destabilizes the tyranny of mechanistic, linear time and says that every moment is pregnant with the promise of divine revelation—the Kingdom of God is always at hand. I am grateful for every person who has pushed Christianity to be intellectually honest, ethically accountable, and consistent with scripture and lived experience. Modern theology is saving Jesus.

But amidst all of the ways that we have updated and upgraded our church teachings, there is a criticism to which I'm always sensitive. H. Richard Niebuhr, great church historian and theologian, warned 60 years ago that if we did away with the old, brooding, punitive theology, it could come with a cost. Niebuhr remarked of the new, positive liberal theologies that were springing up, they taught "A God without wrath [who] brought [people] without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross." Now, Niebuhr's critique can be critiqued. But what he gets right is that at least the old theological system knew that we are never as good as we think we are. The old system called us sinful worms, but at least sin itself was never in doubt. And in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one that witnessed 2

world wars, the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing, environmental destruction on a cataclysmic scale, at least the old theological system wasn't surprised. What can you expect from sinful worms? Only grace could save us. At least in the old system, you could see why we needed Jesus.

I think we still need do. But the rationale—the reason why—is new. That's what I want to explore today. What we have tried to lay out in this series is a different kind of theological anthropology—a different view of human nature and on what it means for human beings to struggle with sin and to need God's help. I've been clear: I do not believe that you and I are basically sinful. We subscribe to a way of understanding the human being that says our *belovedness*—not our sinfulness—is basic reality. We are God's beloveds all the way through. We are created good. We are created to do good. That is what we want you to hear *every* time you come to church.

Our sin does not define us, but still we take it seriously. In the old frame, sin is inescapable, it renders us deserving of punishment—and instead of being punished, Christ is punished for us. In the old system, it was Christ's death that healed us. I believe instead that is the resurrection that heals. Christ's resurrection is the power of love to restore what is broken by sin. What heals us is love—divine love, the grace of acceptance, the gift of knowing that we are beloved.

Those of you who pay close attention in worship (the 4 of you) may have seen these theological conviction taking shape in our congregation's order of worship. Most Presbyterian churches, as part of their liturgy, have a confession of sin, followed by an assurance of grace. That's what I grew up with. Over the years, I've come to the belief that this part of the liturgy is spiritual malpractice. Why? Not because we don't sin. We do. Often. Here's the rub: I've never found the assurance of grace as assuring as the confession of sin was convicting. We spend a minute and a half spelling out all of our horrible sins, then declare in a line or two that we are forgiven. You know what? I don't think it works. We marinate in the sin, but only dip a toe in grace. My former pastor in New York never included a confession of sin in the liturgy. I asked him why. He said, "David, people come to church already knowing we're broken." What we need to know is that God in Christ makes us whole. We need the grace. The grace is what heals.

I suspect a lot of churches hold on to the old theology afraid that if we don't make human beings *bad enough*, we won't ever feel desperate enough to "need Jesus." But we don't need to be called worms to still need Jesus. In a world of original blessing, Jesus still saves. How?

You and I are created by love, for love. That is our nature. We are made to love God with heart and mind and soul and strength and love our neighbors as we love ourselves. That is how you and I express whom God made us to be. Our wellbeing—as individuals and as a society—is gauged by love. Another way of saying this is love is how we become fully human.

If I were able to love, freely and fully on my own, I could safely say to Jesus, "Nah, I'm good." But in my life—and in yours—love does not come easy. Love does not always come naturally. Love is not taught in the curriculum at school. Love is not the end of our economy. Love is not how we treat the natural world. Love is not how we treat each other. It's actually shocking how

much about our world compromises our ability to love. It's the sinful systems in which we live. But it's also the ways our minds get contorted, fearful, angry. I don't know about you, but on a day to day basis, I'm not convinced that I love well.

This failure to love—this falling short of love—is sin. This weight, this debt, this stain, this missing the mark is a failure to live into our full humanity. When I sin, I accept something less than my full human-ness.

I *want* to be human. I want to be in “right relationship” with you—to live in justice and harmony with you and with my family and as a community and with the Creation. I want to be a person, and God's grace is the way to our full humanity. God's grace is the way we become ourselves. Through God's merciful love, through compassion, through love of ourselves, through our own emotional spiritual maturation, through participating in justice, through life in expansive, inclusive Beloved Community. Grace is how our nature is restored. Grace is not just a “nice thing.” Grace is essential to your nature. You have to have it to be you.

God knows that we need grace. Every day. That is why God sent Jesus to us. Our tradition teaches that **Jesus is the event of grace**. Jesus is love in the flesh. Everywhere, throughout the gospels, what we see is God's grace entering the world in Jesus.

In Jesus' baptism, grace is the voice that declares that Jesus is “God's Beloved child.” It is grace that still claims, at every one of our baptisms, that you are God's beloved.

In the wilderness, grace delivers Jesus from the temptation to use his power for his own sake. Grace still delivers you from thinking about power as something that is only for yourself.

In the prodigal son, grace welcomes the lost child home and makes space for him alongside the child that has done everything right. Grace still leads you to forgive sins and welcome those who have sinned back into your family.

In table fellowship with Jesus, grace made room for everyone. Grace still makes a place for you at the table.

In conversations with Zacchaeus and the rich young ruler, grace that offers a way out of the life of greed. Grace still releases you from the love of things and replaces it with a love for people.

When Jesus' heals of those who are sick, grace draws near to suffering and restores bodies to health in community. Grace still leads you to the side of those who suffer to offer consolation and care.

Grace led Jesus into a confrontation with the death-dealing powers and the principalities of the world. Grace gave Jesus courage to turn and face those with the power to crucify. Grace still gives you that courage.

Grace even led the Syrophenecian woman to Jesus; Jesus dismissed her as a dog. She told him that even dogs are fed at the master's table. Grace gave Jesus the humility to see the wideness of God's mercy; grace still gives you the ability to see a world more inclusive than the one we imagine.

Jesus is the event of grace. I don't know about you, but my life without Jesus—my life without the breaking in, the saving love of God's grace—isn't much of a life at all.

When grace comes to you, when grace finds you and calls you "Beloved," when grace forgives you and claims you and sends you out to love and serve and nourish the common good, it transforms your existence. Grace feels like breaking out of a shell; grace feels like your eyes are open for the first time; grace feels like your heart is stretched and enlarged. Grace feels, to borrow a term you may have heard before, like you are born again.

Though we sometimes, in our worship, dispense with the confession of sin, we never will get rid of the assurance of grace.

We need grace. We need Jesus. By the love of God, grace is ours.

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: