

July 31st, 2016

DEBASING GRACE, HOW SHRIEK THE SOUND

John 9:8-38

It is a mistake to look at the miracles recorded in the gospels and think of them as a bunch of randomly recorded unconnected events. If all we say is “well, that’s neat,” we will miss what’s being communicated. After Jesus miraculously turned the water into wine in chapter two, v.11 says “This, *the first of his signs*, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory.” All the miracles in John are **signs** that show us that Jesus is who He says He is—the Son of God and God Himself, sent into the world to rescue sinners; and all the miracles in John are **signs** to show us who we are—lawbreaking, undone and ruined sinners with no hope of salvation outside of Jesus Christ.

This miracle in chapter nine is no different. Jesus miraculously gave this blind man his sight to show two things mainly, 1) that He is the light of the world;¹ and 2) that we are hopelessly blind and lost without Him.

We looked at the miracle two weeks ago, and now we turn to the people’s response to the miracle. What I want to show this morning, God-willing, **is that the people’s response to this miracle is also a sign.** How do the people respond to this miracle? With unbelief, ingratitude and hatred. Why? Because this miracle *displays* the grace of the gospel. And human beings hate grace. Our flesh despises grace. Why? *Because grace sabotages our self-righteousness.* “Debasing grace, how shriek the sound, that blames a wretch like me.” Grace is a plague to our self-righteous hearts, because it tells us that we are undeserving of anything. Grace assassinates our ability to boast in anything that comes from ourselves. And we as a human race hate the idea that we are unworthy of applause.

¹ John 8:12 “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Consider for a moment that line from John Newton's song: "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear." What in the world did Newton mean? Grace taught his heart to fear? How? Well what is grace? **Grace is the unmerited love and favor of God.** Unmerited, meaning undeserved. There is nothing you can do to coerce or convince God to give you grace. He's free to give it or not. "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." (Romans 9:15-16). That's what grace is, and if you understand that, it should cause your heart to **fear** (as Newton said). Because you will realize that if God doesn't show you grace, you will never come to Him, you will never taste the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus, you will not enter into that eternal rest, but you will die under the judgment of a holy God.

The human race hates grace because it debases us, it takes us off the throne, it removes our ability to feel good about ourselves, it nullifies our ability to feel superior. That is what is happening in this passage. This blind man is on display to the watching world that Jesus Christ gives grace at His good pleasure, and that it does not depend on human effort. And the world cannot stand this sight.

We're going to see this in three ways from this passage.

- ☆ The Unbelief of Grace
- ☆ The Ingratitude Towards Grace
- ☆ The Hatred of Grace

The Big Idea...

All mankind blindly hates grace, but Jesus came to open our eyes so that we might treasure it

I. The Unbelief of Grace

The conversation with the man and his neighbors

In verses 1-6, we see Jesus and his disciples pass by a man who was blind from birth. Jesus makes some mud with his spit, and anoints the man's eyes, and tells him to go to the pool of Siloam and wash. And when he washed, he came back seeing. Picking up in v.7 we see the **first conversation** in this passage between the man born blind and his neighbors: "The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is he." Others said, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." And then the man goes on to tell them how his eyes were open.

For the most part, this crowd remains in unbelief. Some were persuaded that this was the same man born blind. However this passage is taking us from one unbelieving conversation to another. First with the crowd and then with the Pharisees, and then with the parents, and then finally with the Pharisees again. And the link that connects these conversations together, **is an unwillingness to believe or admit² what has happened to this man.**

Why wouldn't this crowd believe?

So my question in this first conversation is this: why wouldn't this crowd believe that this miracle occurred? Certainly it would be difficult for 21st century modern atheists to believe in miracles, but not this crowd. This was a Jewish crowd, who believed in Moses, who had a rich history of God performing awesome miracles to their ancestors. Why didn't they believe?

Here's what I think. **I think this crowd believed the same thing that Jesus' disciples did.** Remember the disciples asked Jesus in v.2 "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" [...] I think this crowd reasoned similarly: Good things (like miracles) only happen to good people, they

² This at least seems to be the case with the man's parents. We don't know what they believed, but they were unwilling to admit anything to the Pharisees.

don't happen to blind, begging sinners. This man didn't deserve anything from God, and they had no category for God smiling on a sinner.

But what did Jesus say in v.3? "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." Jesus is saying that it is not sin that is the *ultimate reason* for this man's blindness. Yes he is a sinner, but his sin is not the decisive cause for his blindness. The decisive cause for this man's blindness is so that the world would see God's work of **grace**. That Jesus Christ gives grace to undeserving, spiritually blind beggars who have never done one thing to commend themselves to God. This was *not how* these neighbors viewed God. And so they struggled to believe this miracle.

The Sabbath as an Ironic Megaphone

Next we see these neighbors bringing the man to the Pharisees,³ in order to have them judge what has happened.

[13] They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. [14] Now it was a *Sabbath day* when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. [15] *So* the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, "He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see." [16] Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep *the Sabbath*." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them. [17] So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."

Why would Jesus perform this healing on the Sabbath, since He knew that this would cause a major controversy with the Pharisees? **Because Jesus wants to show us that His work in the gospel is the main point of the Sabbath!** God created the Sabbath day so that we could rest from our works and be healed by

³ Calvin is insightful here by saying: "It is possible that many flatterers, in order to obtain their favor, purposely attempted to conceal the glory of the miracle...willfully shutting their eyes, while the sun is shining, they bring darkness on themselves to obscure its light. It is a foolish superstition of the common people that, under the pretense of honoring God, they adore the wicked tyrants of the Church, and despise God himself, both in his word and in his works, or, at least, do no deign to look at him." John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. XVII*, (Grand Rapids, MI,: Grand Rapids, MI,: BakerBooks, 2009), pg. 373-374

His work! The Sabbath is a hospital of healing for sinners to have their wounds cleansed again and again by the work of the gospel. As one writer has said

“The point of the Sabbath rest is that we are helpless and God creates, God sustains, God heals, we don’t. What day could be better for God (in the flesh) to find a broken man and heal him—to give him and his parents rest from all the struggles of blindness? That’s what the Sabbath is for—God-exalting blessing to broken and weary humans.”⁴

These Pharisees had transformed the Sabbath into the opposite of that. They were using it as a way to please God based on their religious performance. They didn’t see that Sabbath as a sign of their brokenness and God’s gracious healing. Rather they used the Sabbath as a means to promote their righteous performance before God. How ironic! They accused Jesus of not keeping the Sabbath by healing this blind man, but Jesus was the only one keeping the Sabbath! He was dispensing free grace to a broken undone sinner. That is the true meaning of the Sabbath: Christ gives grace to broken sinners, and as broken sinners, we receive. (Illustration of the Lord’s supper—1 Cor. 11:27-28)

II. The Ingratitude Towards Grace

The Pharisees were divided at this point as to the identity of Jesus (v.16), some of them didn’t believe that a sinner could do such things. And so in order to try and unify their ranks in order to bring charges against Jesus,⁵ they pursue the man’s parents. They ask them in v.19

“Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” [20] His parents answered, “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. [21] But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.”

⁴ <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-works-of-god-and-the-worship-of-jesus>

⁵ D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI,: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), pg. 368

The Bondage of Man-Pleasing

It is simply unimaginable that this man's parents didn't know who healed their son. Their son's blindness had been the heartache of their life. Not only did they bear the burden of raising a crippled child, and the stigma of some secret sin attached to their family, but their son was now a infamous beggar, who would never have a family of his own, but die in obscurity and shame. No, this man's parents would have been the first ones to know who healed their blind son. If someone healed my son of his autism, Monica and I would be the first ones to know. So why wouldn't they answer the Jews? Why did they say they didn't know?

[22] (His parents said these things *because* they feared the Jews, *for* the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess *Jesus to be Christ*, [replace with the gospel of grace] he was to be put out of the synagogue.)

Confessing that Christ healed their son would have cost them too much. It would have cost them excommunication from the synagogue. Which means, it would have cost them their reputation. It would have cost them their sense of self-importance that they received from how others view them.

The grace that costs

Grace costs us something. It costs us our reputations. It may cost us our friendships. It may cost us our lives very soon. Martin Luther was excommunicated from the Catholic church in 1521 because he believed in grace. Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer were burned at the stake in Oxford on October 16, 1555 by Queen Mary. What was their crime? They believed in the free grace of Jesus Christ. This was their confession: "Christ made one [offering]⁶ and sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and that a perfect sacrifice; neither needeth there to be, nor can there be, any other

⁶ original—"oblation"

[atoning]⁷sacrifice."⁸ Meaning, no amount of good deeds can justify us before God. Not the mass, not confession, not going to church, not giving to the poor. Jesus Christ was slain, not because we just needed a little help to get to heaven. He was slain because only His blood could wash away our ungodliness. **Jesus Christ has never and will never bring a righteous man into heaven.** He only brings the ungodly. **Romans 4:5** “And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies *the ungodly*, his faith is counted as righteousness,” That is grace! That Jesus would look upon ungodly sinners like you and I and offer forgiveness of sins, and eternal life, if we merely depend upon Him and not ourselves. See Christ as dying in your stead, bleeding for you, forsaken by God the Father for you, taking on the punishment for you an ungodly sinner, and you will be accepted by Him. Not on the account of your work, but His.

The man’s parents were not ready for this. We don’t know what happened to them. But at this point they were unwilling to be debased by grace.

III. The Hatred of Grace

Give glory to God! It cannot be grace!

Because the man’s parents were unwilling to give the Pharisees what they wanted, they went to the man born blind for a second time. But this time, they didn’t want to hear anymore testimony, they demanded that he agree with them. v.24 “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.”

This statement is somewhat mysterious. This is similar to what Joshua said to a man named Achan in the OT. Achan had taken some forbidden spoil that God had devoted to destruction. As a result the Israelites were being defeated by their enemies. So Joshua after the Lord had told him what was going on said to Achan “My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel and give praise to him. And tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from

⁷ original—“propitiatory”

⁸ <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1501-1600/bishops-ridley-and-latimer-burned-11629990.html>

me.” (Joshua 7:19) Joshua put him under an solemn oath. That’s what the Pharisees are doing here. They’re not saying ‘Praise God for what he as done in your life,’⁹ they’re saying ‘We’re putting you on the stand now before God, tell us the truth, what are you hiding?’ They believed Jesus to be a sinner incapable of this act, and therefore the man must be hiding something as to the true nature of the event. They couldn’t stomach the idea of grace shown to undeserving sinners. The man responds

[25] ...“Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” [26] They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” [27] He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” [28] And they *reviled* him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. [29] We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”

Moses vs. Christ

The Pharisees didn’t want to know the truth. The man already told them. And so he responds with holy sarcasm “Do you also want to become his disciples?” And oh how this pushes them to anger. They snarl at the man. Now the issue is no longer the miracle, but their hatred for Jesus. And what do they do, put pit their allegiance to Moses against Christ?

But Jesus already said in **John 5:46** “...if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me.” When Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, Jesus was the main character about which he wrote. Jesus was the main point of the law. **Romans 10:4** “For Christ is the *end of the law* for righteousness to everyone who believes.” **The Pharisees believed that the law was a way for them to please God with their performance.** ‘If I just follow these rules, then God will accept me.’

We were out sharing the gospel a couple weeks ago, and these two young men rejected our claims because they said our religion was no different than any

⁹ D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI,: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), pg. 372

other religion. They actually admitted that they believed in God. But they asked what made our God different than all the other gods that religions teach? “They said that all religions teach basically the same thing: If you do good things, then you can get right with God.” Oh what an opportunity to preach the grace of Christ! The Scripture does not tell us that we can get right with God by our good deeds. Law keeping will never make us pleasing to God. **Romans 3:20** “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” The Pharisees completely missed this. They believed that Moses taught that law-keeping would make us pleasing with God.

And oh how often we believe the same thing. All of us, Christian and non-Christian are performance driven. And this is because we alike feel guilty. We all feel inadequate. And we have to cope with that guilt and inadequacy somehow. So what do we do? We flee to performance. We choose to do things that will give us a sense of accomplishment. Something to ease our conscience. I tend to press harder into my work, because it makes me feel important. **Occupational righteousness.** Some of you press harder into your family life, trying to get things right at home so in at least one sphere we can feel good about yourself. **Familial righteousness.** Some you will escape into excessive video games or movies because in those moments your conscience is forgotten. **Digital righteousness.** Some of you will escape into alcohol or substance abuse because under those influences your conscience becomes quieter. **Chemical righteousness.** We do these things because we don't believe the gospel. We feel guilty and inadequate **because in truth**, we are guilty and inadequate. This is the main problem that faces all human kind.

The answer to this problem is the same for the Christian as it is for the non-Christian. Look to Christ! Only in the gospel do we find an answer for our guilt and inadequacy. **Romans 8:1** “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” The gospel says that if you hope in Christ, your sins have been forgiven. Your guilt has been completely removed. Never to be brought up again. Do you know how powerful that is? If you are in Christ,

every sin that you will ever commit has already been pardoned. That truth frees us from performance. God cannot be more pleased with you if you are in Christ. Yes He will exercise Fatherly discipline with us when we sin. But if you are in Christ, you can never perform more to make God love you more. Nor can you sin in such a way to make God love you less. That's grace.

Excommunicating Grace

This conversation between the Pharisees and the man born blind ends with astonishment and excommunication. v.30

[30] The man answered, "Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. [31] We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. [32] Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. [33] If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

This man continued to testify to the work of Christ. His basic reasoning was that Jesus must be from God. If Jesus were ungodly, as the Pharisees claimed, He could do nothing. The Pharisees would not stand to be corrected:

[34] "*You were born in utter sin*, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.

In this final statement we see a connection between what the disciples thought in v.2 and what the Pharisees think. The disciples said: "Rabbi, who *sinned*, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The Pharisees say here in v.34 "You were born in utter *sin*..." In both cases, the disciples and the Pharisees thought they were better than the man. They thought that because they were not born that way, that somehow they had done something right to please God. On this ground, the Pharisees excommunicated the man from the synagogue. The man saw grace, while they willfully shut their eyes to it.

Application

Our Doctrine: All mankind blindly hates grace

Christians have a love/hate relationship with grace. In our spirits, there is nothing sweeter than the undeserved love and favor of God. But in our flesh we resist grace with all our might, because it leaves us nothing to boast in.

There was a Christian conference earlier this summer in which one of the main speakers was promoting a book on marriage. The author of that book said that he was "dedicated to mentoring men in such a way that they will literally illustrate Christ in their homes and their communities, resulting in *divorce-proofing* Christian marriages." Do more, be better, try harder, and the *certain result* will be that you will not get a divorce. The implication: if you get a divorce, you *must not* have performed. Conversely, if you stay together, you *must have* performed well. This is tragic. Following this Christian author's advice will only result in either condemnation because you didn't perform, or in self-righteousness because you succeeded.

Dear congregation, we ought to work on our marriages. It's true that God uses means. In the case of the blind man Jesus used mud. Likewise we are instructed in many passages of Scripture to use the means of grace to have better marriages. But if God doesn't give us free grace, our best means are mud. This applies to everything.

Listen to how Paul applied this to himself in **1 Corinthians 15:10** "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." Paul attributed all his labor, not to his own effort ultimately, but to the free grace of God.

Our Duty: We must never stop preaching the gospel of grace to ourselves

If it's true that we are bent towards performance/self righteousness just like everyone in this passage, how do we overcome this? By constantly looking to grace. We must preach the gospel to ourselves. As human beings, we are always in dialog with ourselves. We are always convincing ourselves to be angry, or fearful, or anxious, or discouraged or proud depending upon our situation. These emotions always tempt us to believe in false gospels. The false gospel of better circumstances: "If this could circumstance could just change, then I would be happy." The false gospel of anxiety: "If I could just do this better, then I would be accepted."

We have to stop listening ourselves and start preaching to ourselves. And I don't mean just a canned gospel invitation that we would give to an unbeliever. I mean all the promises that Jesus Christ offers us in Scripture.

When David's wife and children were stolen from him and his own men were talking of stoning him, what did he do? He preached the gospel to himself. 1 Samuel 30:6 **"David strengthened himself in the LORD his God."**

We need to do the same. Four things I would offer that I have gleaned from pastor Paul Tripp in how to preach the gospel to yourself.¹⁰

1) Gaze upon the beauty of Jesus Christ.

Go to Scripture with the prayerful intent of seeing Jesus Christ with fresh eyes. Don't just read, but meditate on biblical portraits of Christ. **See Christ as becoming a servant for our sake:** (Phil. 2:7) **See Christ as the delight of all the saints and angels in heaven:** (Revelation 7:16-17). Mine Scripture for the beauty of Christ and just sit at his feet and worship.

2) Remember who you are in Christ.

¹⁰ <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/preach-the-gospel-to-yourself>

See Christ's promise that no one can ever condemn you: "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." (Romans 8:34) See Christ's promise that nothing can ever separate you from His love (Romans 8:39)

3) Rest in his power and provision, and not in your own.

See Christ's promise to never never abandon us but to always be our helper: "I will never leave you nor forsake you. So we can confidently say, "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" (Hebrews 13:6)

4) Act in reliance upon Him.

Act in freedom knowing that Christ Jesus has made you His own: The apostle Paul said "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." (Philippians 3:12)

I regularly suffer from mild anxiety attacks. The anxiety attacks focus on one thing: that I could be shown as a failure. This is how I deal with it. I preach to myself that I am a failure in my own flesh. But Christ has made me His own. I belong to Him. He is my joy, He is my strength, He is my hope.

Our Delight: Christ never fails to bring His people grace

We had youth group this week and we were talking about God's grace. I asked the youth what they thought grace was. This was one of their answers: God's grace is the inclination of his heart to show us favor. God is bent to show us kindness and favor. God is not reluctantly saying '...ok, fine, I'll give you favor God again.' God is running to us to give us grace. He is not a stingy God.

Consider this passage from an aerial perspective. Who comes to the blind man in v.1? Jesus. Did Jesus wait for the blind man to ask for healing? No. When the blind man was excommunicated at the end of this passage, who found

who? “Jesus heard that they cast him out and having found him, He said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” Jesus came to the man! That’s what happens with brothers and sisters! For those of you who have save, you have been healed. You have your eyesight restored, you’ve tasted the heavenly gift, and what is Jesus doing to you right now? He’s coming to you again! The presence of the Living God is coming to you right now so that you can breathe, and be relieved of you guilt and inadequacies. And rest in the freedom of Christ. And that is Christ doing that. That’s Christ. Christ never fails to bring grace to His people. He is the initiator!