

Graffiti



The words that define our faith have the potential to embody the beauty and mystery of our faith. But all too often, they instead become boundary markers, marking who is welcome and who is not. In this series, we seek to recover the beauty of these words, and through them, the beauty and power of the faith into which God has invited us.

The Exchange Economy

The word 'grace' originally meant 'favor'. It's a term that we get from sovereign/subject relationships - a patron/client or king/subject. If I have 'favor', it means the king is pleased with me, and probably that I'll get some sort of physical manifestation of that favor - lands or a title or money. That's why we can say that someone is in "good graces".

To speak of the king's grace is to talk about who the king considers to be on his side, loyal, faithful and worthy of reward. If I show up with a giant pile of money and a large estate all given to me by the king, we might say that our king is very graceful or gracious.

Grace is favor. Both the attitude (looking favorably on someone) and the physical rewards that come with being in favor.

But of course we all know that kings don't bestow their grace impartially. You have to *earn* a king's favor. When we see someone who's been given grace or favor, we can rightly ask, "What did you do to get in the king's good graces?"

That's because in our world, 'grace' is part of a particular kind of economy - an economy of exchange. When we talk about 'economy' we mean the process by which goods and services are exchanged. Our economy is an exchange economy (pretty much every economy in human history is). I don't give you something unless you get something of equal or greater value (in your opinion) in return. So it could be money or trade or whatever.

(In fact, we've talked quite a bit about this very thing - how even our gift giving can be part of an exchange economy - in our series on Generosity back in September and as a part of our Advent series on Hospitality. We learn from our culture to treat everything as an exchange.)

"Grace" becomes much the same. We get favor from someone when we do something for them. Someone else gets our favor when they do something that benefits us.

We understand that the easier we make our boss' life, the easier ours will be. We feel obligation when someone gives us a gift (a grace, a favor) to repay them. Because it's exchange. If I give to you, then you owe me. And if you give to me, then I owe you. "Grace" is really just one more form of currency, no different from cash.

So the question we should ask is, "Is this how God's grace works?" We want to know, at the end of the day, when all the chips have fallen, if God works in an exchange economy. Does God give us grace only when we give him something back? And what could we give God, in any case? Well, we know God wants us to be good. That God expects us to read our Bibles or help the poor, to go to Bible studies or pray or serve or whatever. That if we only watch certain kinds of television or movies, or listen to the right music, we'll earn credit with God, make ourselves more worthy of blessing or favor. To earn Grace.

How many of us have turned to God when we were in trouble, threw up a prayer like a last-ditch, Hail Mary pass that just *had* to work? I know I have. I did it all the time in school, especially when I hadn't studied. I became the master bargainer at that point - God, please give me an A on this test, and I promise I'll read my Bible every day and pray and I'll never miss church.

Or, on a more serious note, have you ever heard the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" It's a good question, an honest question. We see bad things happen all the time, we experience the pain they cause. And so we ask, "Why?" Why did this happen? Am I being punished?" But as honest as this question is, as real as it is, it reveals that we tend to think in terms of exchange economy... We think that because we're basically good, because we've done what God expects of us, that God owes it to us to be good to us in return. And when that doesn't happen (because let's be real - everyone has hard times)... When that doesn't happen, we get confused and we lose faith because God isn't acting the way we think he should.

We expect Grace in return for goodness. Favor in exchange for faith. Prizes when we're pious.

And we look for that because we think God lives in the same economy we do - that God lives by rules of exchange.

But we saw last week that God does not live in an exchange economy. God doesn't give to get. God just gives.

And that reframes the way we look at Grace all together. Suddenly, we have to ask... if God is a giver, then who gets God's Grace? If we can't earn God's grace, if God doesn't give us gifts in exchange for what we do, then who is in God's good graces? Whom does God favor? Whom does God bless? Who gets good gifts from God?

Who gets God's grace?

The straightforward, surprising answer is, "everybody". Consider what Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount:

"He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." -- Matthew 5:45

According to Jesus, how good or bad you are doesn't actually affect how God looks at you, at least in so far as it pertains to receiving gifts from God. That's hard for us to understand, because it's not exchange. And that's not really how we want it to be. What we really want is a sense of karma - that if you do good, you get good and if you're bad, then you get punished. Because many of us consider ourselves pretty good. Maybe we're not saints, but we're certainly not the worst of sinners. We expect reward, and we would like our enemies to be punished.

That doesn't make us bad people... it just makes us people. That's how we all work (we all tend to be the heroes of our own stories). But hear what God's economy sounds like: In another scripture, an early follower of Jesus wrote to a group of Christians who was trying to figure out why they were suffering. They were asking why God wasn't coming to avenge them, to punish the wicked (sound familiar?).

The writer tells them this:

"The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." -- 2 Peter 3:9

The reason God is taking so long is because he's *waiting*. He wants as many of those "evil wicked sinners" to find him as possible. And the good news is that that includes you and me. That's why this is such good news. We like to create a sliding scale of righteousness, a scale of goodness to help us figure out how much we owe (and how much others owe). But God doesn't do scales. Compared to God, we've all come up short. We owe God more than we could ever pay.

But again, as we saw last week, God isn't concerned with collecting debts. Because God doesn't live in an exchange economy. God's economy is focused around giving freely, without condition or restraint. Who gets God's favor? Everyone. Who gets God's blessings? Well, we all do. We've talked often in our time together about this whole, beautiful world we live in (and Sheila's going to talk more about it next week) - how all of creation is a beautiful gift from God. We've talked too about how favored we are here - that 1 of every 2 persons in the world lives on less than \$2/day, but here all of us sit in relative comfort and luxury. (Don't feel guilty; feel grateful!) We live in God's grace. We have God's favor. Because God created us and God loves us.

Can you wrap your brain around that? God loves all of us. There's no such thing as 'too bad' for God. And just like you can't earn God's grace, you can't 'unearn' it either. It's free - it has nothing to do with what we do. Because God is not a God of the exchange economy. God's economy is one of giving. God's grace is a free gift.

<transition into *How He Loves*>

The Funny Thing About Gifts...

That God's grace, his favor, his blessing, is a free gift tells us something very interesting about grace. Think about gift-giving. Imagine that you have a boss or teacher who gives you a gift. You come into work or class one day, and there is a beautifully wrapped gift sitting on your desk.

You've been given a free gift - this isn't a performance bonus or a welcome back present or anything. It's really and truly a 'just because' gift.

But imagine with me now that for some reason you choose not to accept the gift. Imagine that you refuse the gift, just left it sitting there. Of course the gift is still freely given. But it would be wrong to say that there aren't any strings attached, at least in some sense, because giving is *still* an economy. It's a two way street. If I give, then you have to receive. Otherwise you're not participating.

You can let that gift sit on the desk day after day after day, and choose never to participate (and then probably also hope it's not some sort of food item). Or you can open it up and enter into the economy of the gift. The economy of Grace, we might call it.

So what does God's Economy of Grace look like? Here are some helpful pointers:

Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them - -Hebrews 13:9

First, see that God's Economy is not one of rules and regulations - the author of Hebrews tells us flat out that rules and codes don't even benefit the people who observe them! Grace is what saves us, what strengthens us. I'm not sure we can over-emphasize that truth. But so what? What do we DO with grace?

Be good stewards of God's diverse gift of grace by serving one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. -- 1 Peter 4:10-11

We've all been given gifts, favor, grace from God, but it all looks different. You have different gifts than I do. My gift might be speaking, while yours could be music. Or cooking. Or knowing your way around engines and mechanical stuff. Or you might have more money than most. Or you might have a gift with languages. Maybe you have an exceptional work ethic. Or you're the life of the party. Maybe you're exceptionally wise and thoughtful. Or warm and compassionate.

Whatever your gifts are, they're opportunities to serve each other. If I speak, I should speak as though I am speaking the very words of God. If you're hosting a party, host as though God himself is coming. If you're preparing a meal, cook as though God himself bought you those ingredients and as though the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are eating the meal you're fixing.

What are the places in your life that you've been gifted? Where are your skills and passions and talents? You have a choice. You can choose to look at those as "just" hobbies or things to keep you occupied. Or, you can see them as invitations to participate in God's Economy of Grace.

Your hobbies and occupations can be chances to participate in God's mysterious inner Trinitarian life *because* they're chances to give. They're chances to receive what God has given you and become a channel for God's gifts to others.

You can receive grace, and you can give grace.

The Challenge of Living in a Grace Economy

Of course I recognize that this is much easier said than done. It's very easy to say that we're going to give grace. But we know the reality is hard. It's very hard to move to a Grace economy rather than an exchange economy. We don't want to be kind to everyone. Earlier, we looked at Jesus' words about God - that he makes it rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Look at the full quotation:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." -- Matthew 5:43-45

Jesus' words are actually bound up in a command to us: that living in God's economy, God's way of seeing the world demands that we love our enemies, that we pray not just for the people who treat us how we should be treated, but *everyone*. Why? Because that's what God does.

Your gifts, the favor you've received from God, the grace you've received from God, is yours *whether or not you deserve it* (and let's be honest - we don't). So if you're going to receive all that *as grace, as gift*, then you will do the same.

<pitcher analogy>

And that's challenging. That's difficult. It's a whole different way of living, of seeing the world.

But there's more good news:

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly..."
-- Titus 2:11-12

God's grace is a present, ongoing reality. Right now? You're receiving grace. When we leave? We get grace. Tomorrow when we wake up? Grace. And when we choose to recognize the grace, the favor that is all around us, God's gifts begin to train us how to live gracefully. God gives us grace to teach us how to be gracious. Grace is working in you right now.

Communion

It's good, then, that we celebrate communion together, because nothing else we do helps us to focus on the grace we've received and continue to receive and will receive as well as communion does. The night Jesus was betrayed, he met with his followers for a meal. And as they ate together, he took bread and broke it and passed it around the table. As his followers took it, he said, "This bread is my body, which is broken for you. Whenever you eat it, remember me."

Later in the meal, he took a cup of wine and passed it around. As the disciples drank from it, he said, "This cup is the new covenant between you and God, that's made in my blood. Whenever you drink, remember me."

So we come to the Communion Table today to remember Jesus. To confess that his ultimate gift - his own life - demonstrated that no matter how little we *deserve* God's favor, we have it. This Table proves that God does not work in an exchange economy. And so when we come, we are free to live in God's generous economy.

We are reminded to love our enemies even as Jesus loved us even though we were his enemies. And we are reminded that by taking this bread and juice, we are welcomed into God's kingdom, to live as God's citizens.

Prayer of Consecration

If you want to live in God's generous economy, you are invited to come and take part in God's table.