



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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GRACE

Some think of grace as a sort of spiritual gasoline which fuels our Christian lives. We receive Holy Communion each Sunday (the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace) in order to fill the tank for another week. Then we are all set (unless we really fall into sin) until the next Sunday.

In reality, grace is far more splendid than this image would suggest. Grace is what God gives us to enable us to be Christians and to live as Christians. It is His gift to us which establishes and maintains our relationship with Him. Without it we would remain sinners, and thus alienated and apart from Him. With it we are reconciled to Him and made ready to take our places in His presence in the next Life.

Grace is always a gift. It can never be earned. We can never put God in the position where He owes us grace. At the same time, He doesn't force it upon us. Grace can be refused. These are the two sides to grace -- giving and receiving -- which we must understand if we are to succeed in basing our spiritual lives upon it. Any spiritual life not based on grace is doomed to failure.

God wills to give us grace because He loves us. It is given out of His generosity: that is His nature. This is sometimes a little hard for us to fathom. We know generous people in the world, but none so generous as that. For God keeps giving even when the gift is refused. He sent His Son into the world -- the greatest Gift He could offer -- and even that was refused. "He came unto His own and His own received Him not." (John 1:11) We know from our own experience that we have often turned away from Him and gone our own (sinful) way. Yet He was always there, offering us the grace to be forgiven, the grace to pull us up out of the holes we dug for ourselves. Our unfaithfulness does not stop the flow of grace, though it may wound His love. He wills that all men might receive the saving grace which He offers: that is the extent of His generosity.

The danger with such generosity is that we take it for granted. As we find that He is always there, we may be tempted to

think that we might as well go ahead and sin, since forgiveness is around the corner, or as Saint Paul says, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Romans 6:1) Or we may be tempted to think that since God is always giving us grace it is not worth very much. Something of which there is so much is bound to be pretty near worthless, is it not? So we come to regard His gift as cheap.

Such ideas arise when we fail to understand just what God is doing with us. Grace comes in order that we might be saved: in order that we might love Him as He loves us. The gifts come to us in order to teach us how much He loves us, and thus how much we ought to love Him in return. He lavishes grace upon us in order that we might be thankful, and thus wish to live in obedience to His instructions. He is trying to win over our hearts. When we try to see this as a monetary transaction between God and us -- He gives us X and we then give Him Y -- we are bound to do God wrong.

Just because grace is always free does not mean it is cheap. It never costs us anything, since it is God's gift (though of course if we respond to it, it will cost us all the sins we hold dear). But it costs Him -- it costs the sacrifice of His Son upon the cross. Grace comes from love, and love (God's love) is bound up with sacrifice. The grace of redemption which is offered us comes from the sacrifice of the cross. It is infinitely costly -- to God, not to us. And even though grace comes to us free and in great abundance, we should not therefore undervalue it. For grace brings us as a gift that which we cannot have in any other way: our place in heaven.

There are various ways of categorizing the different kinds of grace which God gives us. Two are of importance for our understanding of grace in Christian life. The first is the distinction between justifying and sanctifying grace. Justifying grace is that given in baptism (or our conversion and desire for baptism) by which we are made one with Christ in His death and resurrection, and adopted as children of God. This grace is the foundation of Christian life. It is God's act which transforms us from sinners, living in opposition to Him, to redeemed and adopted sons of God. We are thereby given citizenship in heaven, and started on our Christian lives.

Sanctifying grace is all that follows justifying grace -- all that makes us holy. It is the grace which operates in our spiritual lives as we learn to resist temptation, to manifest the fulness of God's love in our lives, to grow into the full stature of Christ. It is the grace of growth.

The point of the distinction is this: however much we may sin, however much we may feel that we are bad Christians and have refused the grace God has offered us, we have still received the grace of justification. The foundation is still there, even if we have failed to construct a very sound building upon it. We need to remember this when we are tempted to despair. Similarly, the grace of baptism -- great as it is -- is not the end of God's gifts to us but the beginning. The whole work of becoming adults in Christ is still before us at baptism. Though

we are born as sons of God, we must still grow up. God does not leave us to do that on our own, but continues His gifts of grace throughout our lives.

The second distinction is between sacramental grace and what we might call special or occasional grace. Sacramental grace is that given in the sacraments, especially the grace of the Eucharist. This grace is offered to us every time we assist at the Holy Mysteries, every time we receive Communion. It is a regular feeding upon Christ's Body and Blood for spiritual nourishment: forgiveness of sins and increasing unity with Christ. We receive it by Christ's commandment, and so expect to receive the regular grace which all Christians normally need to grow as Christians.

In addition, there is the special grace which God gives to each of us as needed. This is the grace to resist a particular temptation, the grace to fulfill our individual vocations, the grace to pray as we ought, the grace to overcome our particular spiritual handicaps. In short, it is the grace to overcome in time of need.

God has promised both of these graces. Sacramental grace we can count on when the sacrament is celebrated in faith according to His ordinances. He has promised to convey the virtue of His Body and Blood in the sacrament. Similarly, He has promised grace to help in time of need. He will not ask anything of us unless He is willing to give us the grace to accomplish it. He will not allow us to be tested beyond our capacity -- though that is our capacity as it is aided by grace. Any vocation He gives us He will also give us the grace to fulfill. Any temptation which He allows He will offer us the grace to resist. We can depend on His promise: the grace will be there when we need it.

The regular use of the sacramental means of grace helps us to receive the special graces when we need them. It would be a little arrogant to expect God to bail us out in time of need if we failed to make use of the regular channels of grace He has given us. Conversely, if we sought only sacramental grace, and did not look for God's help in time of need, we would often fall in temptation, and our Christian life would be divorced from our life with problems. Sacramental and special graces are thus complementary. We must seek each in its place.

The other side of grace is the receiving side. When we think about receiving grace, the first thing to remember is that we can refuse it. God never forces it upon us. He always respects our freedom in the matter. This is a little scary, because it means that our freedom is real and we can reject God's will for us. We can ally ourselves with His enemies if we wish to. God wills to win us with love and not coercion. If we respond, it is to be with the heart and not just with grudging external obedience.

If it is possible to refuse grace, it will take some positive action on our part to receive it. We must open ourselves to it. So long as we are convinced that we do not need God's help, we will not accept what is offered. So long as we are closed in on ourselves, there will

be no room for Someone else. If our hands are clutching tightly to what we think we have, we will not be able to hold anything else in them.

The grace which is offered us is incompatible with certain other things which we may wish to have: sin, self-indulgence, pride, bad habits and so forth. If we are to have the grace, we will have to let go of the sin. Both we cannot have at the same time. This is what makes it hard to accept God's grace sometimes. We do not want to let go of the sin, for it is familiar and (in its perverse way) pleasant. We are a little afraid of living without it. Or we are afraid that we will lose control of our lives if we accept God's grace -- as indeed we will. To accept His grace is to accept His authority in our lives. We are afraid of losing what control we think we have. We are afraid of placing ourselves in Another's hands, even though we know that He is good and can will nothing for us but what is good. We are afraid of letting go in order to receive.

But once we begin to let go and receive, we learn that God's gifts are always better than what we gave up to receive them. We learn by experience that God is good and takes care of us. Then we will be a little more willing to let go, and so receive a bit more from His hand. The more we let go, the more we receive. The more we receive, the more God offers us. He wishes us to be absolutely full of His grace: He wishes us to be saints, the perfection of His creation in us.

In our Christian lives we must cultivate the openness to God that will allow us to receive the grace that He offers. We will strive to live for His gifts, and not for our own achievements. We will learn to rejoice in our dependence upon grace. We will not resent it, as we are inclined to resent worldly situations upon which we are dependent. Rather we will rejoice that we are counted worthy to be given such graces. We will rejoice to receive those things which allow the triumph of virtue and righteousness in our lives, knowing that on our own there would be no righteousness within us.

Our attitude in prayer is to be one of openness, receptivity. But this is far from passive. We must actively will to receive God's gifts, not trying to earn them or making God owe them to us by our virtue. Unless we will to receive His gifts, we will refuse them by default. We are to prefer grace to all else in our lives, letting go of whatever conflicts with grace. So we will express our love for God, by valuing and accepting His gifts.

It is a wondrous thing to live in God's grace, to know the riches of His love sanctifying our lives. It is awesome to think of His grace, and that He cares enough about each of us to give it to us in the form that is best for us. Our awe and wonder should lead us to ever greater commitment to receive, to accept the bounty which is there waiting for us to take it up, and to fear with holy fear that we might undervalue it or even refuse it altogether. The grace before us is the touch of God's loving hand, if we will but allow Him to embrace us.