

What is grace? ... What... is... grace?

Who is it for? What does it look like? What does it **FEEL** like?

This sermon series, **INDISCRIMINATE**, has been looking at the very heart of God... How He doesn't discriminate with His love... How the Joy of Jesus doesn't discriminate against certain situations or circumstances... How the hope of the Father is something far more expansive, panoramic and infinite...

And today we close this series of conversations with the topic of **grace**.

Indiscriminate grace. Grace that doesn't play favorites, grace that doesn't rest on one nationality or demographic or gender or sexuality or even... religion. Grace available and experienced by every tribe, every tongue...

Grace that is universal. Grace that is unlimited.

A grace that makes us uncomfortable.

STORY: In 1994, a Wisconsin minister named Roy Ratcliff, received a phone call that an inmate at a nearby prison wanted to be baptized. Kind of out of the blue, but definitely something to celebrate... One of these tough-guy, hardened-criminals had given their lives to Jesus. So he hops in his car and drives over.

But when he arrives, he quickly learns that the inmate's name was **Jeffrey Dahmer**.

Jeffrey Dahmer, the man who was convicted to 15 consecutive life sentences for the horrific crimes he committed. A serial killer, known worldwide for his disturbing crimes. Kidnapping, pedophilia, murder, cannibalism, necrophilia... The list goes on and on, becoming more and more depraved and evil. **This man, now requesting to be baptized.**

So Roy Ratcliff baptizes him... And continued to meet with Dahmer for an hour, every week, from there after. Some people thought this was good, but most people criticized it, and were disturbed by it. How could this man, responsible for the deaths of 17 men and boys, become a Christian?

And it began to expose the problem we have with grace.

One of the most prominent questions Ratcliff got about his time with this serial killer is if he believed **Jeffrey Dahmer's faith was genuine**. Was the conversion sincere? And this minister's response was always, *"Yes, I am convinced he was sincere."*

Baptism is representing this new season of life, stepping out of the old ways and into being a new creation...

2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT

17 This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

And Jeffrey Dahmer **did** live differently after his baptism.

- **Weekly** meetings with a pastor
- **Repentance** for his crimes
- Genuine concern for doing **the right thing**
- **Serving** his sentence out as a prisoner for the rest of his life, while hoping to **honor God** and bring glory to Him throughout it

If I'm honest, I know far more folks that have been baptized with **no genuine change** in the way they're living than Jeffrey Dahmer, who actually demonstrated it.

What is it within us that questions God's ability to change someone's heart?

No matter how dark, how broken, how evil...

Because true grace is supremely uncomfortable.

Ratcliff writes in a book about his time with Dahmer that when people would question Jeffrey's sincerity, it seemed to always be from a place of the questioner **hoping** to be able to **reject** Jeffrey Dahmer from the family of God... Hoping to find a reason that he wouldn't be considered a brother in the faith.

It's much easier to rest at night thinking that he is paying for his sins in eternity... Rather than experiencing the very presence of God right now. **It disturbs us.**

6 months after he was baptized, another inmate killed him (Some of you guys know this story). **Claiming that God had told him to do it...** Believing that this was the right thing to do, that God would want him to murder Jeffrey Dahmer because of the heinous crimes he had committed.

Which leaves us with a question... Which is it?

Do we have a gracious, forgiving Father that welcomes in even the worst of sinners? Or do we have a violent, wrath-filled God that orders people to kill in the name of justice?

And herein lies, I believe, **the most important** part of our Christian spirituality... We can get EVERYTHING ELSE right, but if this is off center, then the whole thing crumbles. And it's this:

Does God look upon us with love? Or is He angry with us?

Is God the loving father we **hope** He is?

Or is He the angry father that we're **afraid** He is?

Now, I recognize that LOVE and ANGER aren't opposites... They can co-exist. Anyone that's been married for more than 10 minutes knows this. Anyone with children knows this.

But I do think these are predominant thoughts when it comes to WHO we believe God is... **Is God angry?**

I think, if we were to do a survey here and ask if we believe that GOD IS GOOD... We'd get pretty consistent responses. Yes... **Yes, God is good.** We either believe that, or we **want** to believe that. God is good.

But, in our brokenness, and our sinful nature, we can interpret "good" in a thousand different ways... **Many of which are opposite of GOOD.**

Christopher Scarver believed it was **GOOD** to murder Jeffrey Dahmer.

Bernie Madoff believed it was **GOOD** to steal people's life savings.

Christopher Columbus believed it was **GOOD** to discover new lands, and he believed it was **GOOD** to enslave native people.

Adolf Hitler believed it was **GOOD** to eradicate the Jewish people from the face of the earth.

To this day, we have men and women of radical extremist faiths believing it's **GOOD** to walk into a crowd with a bomb.

"Good" can be distorted, perverted, subjected to whatever we want it to mean.

We believe it's **GOOD** to have new clothes, hopefully cheap!, but don't consider the workers in Bangladesh that made them.

We think it's **GOOD** to get the newest iPhone, even though it means our current one goes in a landfill.

We believe it's **GOOD** to tell people the truth of the Gospel, but preface it with telling them they're living sinful lifestyles.

"Good" can mean a thousand different things. We can shape it to mean whatever will help us sleep at night.

Does God look upon us with love? Or is He angry with us?

Because this changes everything about how we understand grace.

I want to speak for a minute about **JUSTICE**. Justice is an enormous theme in the Bible. There are over 100 passages that mention "justice" ... And I believe it's something central to God's heart for humanity.

After all, is life with no justice worth living? If there is no justice, then what do we do with all of the evil in the world? We can't survive, we can't reconcile... Just this past week, a Bernie Sanders supporter shot a bunch of Republicans while they were practicing baseball. **A BERNIE SANDERS SUPPORTER!** They're supposed to be the hippies! (When will it end?)

If there's no justice, we'll never be able to survive. **People need to be held accountable for their actions.** Just like Jeffrey Dahmer. He might've become a Christian in jail, but he was still staying in there for 15 consecutive life sentences.

So, JUSTICE... What does **true justice** look like?

Is it an eye for an eye? Like the American death penalty... *"You killed someone? We're going to kill you!"*

We believe that, don't we? **We believe that the punishment must match the injury.** You hurt me? I'm going to hurt you.

We do this nationally (on massive scale), in war, and we do this emotionally (on tiny scale), in our relationships. *"You hurt me? I hurt you."*

This where our definitions for **JUSTICE** and **REVENGE** become confused. When someone commits a crime, we want them to learn their lesson, yes... But we also, secretly, want them to **suffer**, at least a little bit.

We **LOVE** movies when the bad guy, typically at the end, there in some precarious battle scene, fighting on scaffolding, on a crane, on top of a sky scraper... Then the moment comes. The bad guy slips, his eyes widen in fear, and we see him fall to his death.

The fear in their eyes is what makes it so seductive to us! That's what makes it feel like the good guy won! *"Ah HA! Weakness! Vulnerability! Suffering!"*

Good beats evil.

But does it? Is that how God works?

How does God view our crimes? How does God view our sin and selfishness and obsession with **everything** except Him?

Because the God I see in Jesus, doesn't look anything like that.

Matthew 5:38-39 NLT

38 "You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also.

Matthew 5:43-45 NLT

43 "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. 44 But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! 45 In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.

What do we do with that?

And what does that show us about God's heart for us?

Is God angry with us? **Or does He look upon us with love?**

Here's my position, and then I want to spend the rest of our time digging into the Scripture that supports it.

When God looks at our lives, and sees all the mess, the fear, the hatred, the selfishness, the lying, the perversion... When God looks upon his beloved, but broken, children... He doesn't ask Himself, "*Well... What crime have they committed and what punishment do they deserve?*"

He asks Himself, "*What do I need to do to make these broken people whole again?*"

"What do I need to do to make these broken people whole again?"

And this perspective of God changes everything.

Instead of focusing on **RETRIBUTION**, He's focused on **RESTORATION**. Retribution is punishment as vengeance, Restoration is merciful and gracious, with the hope of healing the brokenness that caused the punishment in the first place.

The restorative justice of God.

It's beautiful, and it changes how we view God and interact with God and understand the Word of God.

Let's turn together to Luke 15...

This is one of the most popular parables that Jesus told, **The Parable of the Prodigal Son**. *(A parable, for those of us that don't know, was a simple story to illustrate a spiritual lesson. Masterful teachers can take complex moral and spiritual truths and communicate them in a simple story... And Jesus was the best of the best.)*

This parable, which has become known throughout the world, was just one of Jesus' daily teachings He made up, and in this 3 minute story, He forever changed how we understand God as Father, and the grace that He extends to us.

Luke 15:11-32 NLT

...Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. ¹² The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

¹³ “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴ About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵ He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”’

²⁰ “So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹ His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’

²² “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. ²³ And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, ²⁶ and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’

²⁸ “The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, ²⁹ but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. ³⁰ Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’

³¹ “His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. ³² We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’”

It starts with the younger son thinking he can do life better on his own, essentially telling his father he wishes he was dead. “*I’d rather have your money than a relationship with you.*”

He quickly realizes that he’s in over his head. v. 17, “When he finally came to his senses...” he decides to return home. He prepares a speech.

And in his speech, he confesses, repents and then asks to become like a hired hand... that he’s not worthy to be called a son.

- And this is an interesting note: Obviously he WANTED to be a son, but didn’t think he was worthy, so he was planning on working his way back into sonship. He’d work hard, impress his father, and eventually, hopefully, the Father would forgive him and accept him back into sonship.
- This shows that the younger son thought the Father would be angry. He was **expecting** to be greeted with anger.

But he wasn’t, was he?

- “...While he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. **Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.**”

I love this next section: The son begins his prepared speech, but the Father doesn't even acknowledge him. He's already planning the celebration, "*Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger!*"

- The robe and the ring are **SUPER IMPORTANT**: The Father wants to remind the son about his identity... "You're not a fool; you're not homeless; you're not a failure... You're my son."
 - The ring was a signet ring, with the family seal on it. The Father says, "**I'm not going to let you work your way back; this is a gift.**"

It's a beautiful reunion, and it gives us a look at the heart of God the Father. **Remember, this is Jesus' story!** But it doesn't stop there.

The older son was working in the fields, being a **GOOD** son! Doing whatever the Father expected of him.

- When he finds out about his younger brother returning, he's angry! He's angry that his Father treated his failure of a brother with such love and grace.

The older brother refuses to join the celebration. That's what happens when we allow our pride and self-righteousness distort our view of grace... We miss out on the party. That's it, at the end of the day. It's not that we're justified and righteous in our suffering; it's that we're allowing our pride to get in the way of **celebration and joy.**

This next piece I love... so much. Because if this were me, if I was the Father, I'd be like, "*Fine! Don't come in! Get out of here!*" But God is so much more **patient** and **kind** than me.

- The Father reminds the older brother of *his* true identity as well: "*Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours.*"
 - Which is actually **completely true**. In the ancient Middle East, if a father had two sons, he would divide the inheritance into 3 portions, giving two thirds to the older brother and one third to the younger. He already gave the one third to the younger brother and it was squandered away. Now all he has left is the two thirds, and it belongs completely to the older brother. Whenever the Father dies, the older brother inherits everything. "**Everything I have is yours.**"

And that's basically it. End of the story. It never says what the older brother ended up doing... If you jump back to the first few verses of this chapter, Luke 15, you'll see that Jesus was speaking to "*Pharisees and teachers of religious law*" (v. 2)... And He was leaving the story open-ended... **As if asking them to respond with their lives.**

- "*Well... What will you do? Will you stand outside of the party, bitter that you've been faithful and these sinners are being celebrated?*"
- *Are you going to let your self-righteousness get in the way of enjoying your life?*
- *Are you going to miss everything spectacular that I'm doing in your midst?"*

This is a brilliant parable on a thousand different levels... But one piece I want to highlight for us is that with both the outright **sinner**, and the self-righteous, goody-two-shoes **sinner**... God the Father shows grace.

He doesn't look at the younger brother and say, "Well... *What crime have you committed and what punishment do you deserve?*"

He asks Himself, "*What do I need to do to make these broken children of mine whole again?*" **And he pursues them both.** With love and patience... Extending grace to both of them.

On both ends of the spectrum, we can get ourselves into trouble... Either by being overly irreligious, or overly religious. **Both lose sight of God.**

But God, in His grace, calls us both into the party.

Grace is uncomfortable. And by definition, grace is indiscriminate. Grace doesn't play favorites, grace doesn't rest on one nationality or demographic or gender or sexuality or even... religion. God's grace is universal; it is unlimited; and it is entirely His to extend it to whomever He pleases, whenever He pleases.

Matthew 5:45 NLT

For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.

Grace is a gift.

Ephesians 2:8-9 NIV

*8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—
9 not by works, so that no one can boast.*

Grace is the free and unmerited favor of God. **And it's all yours.**

God has been trying to get us to understand this for millennia.

When we were executing God's son, God was, perhaps, in the best possible situation for **retributive justice**. Who would blame Him if He decided to send fire down from heaven? Or cause a sinkhole to swallow them up? Or vaporize the whole earth? No one would blame Him. If you watched someone executing your child... You'd do everything in your power to stop them (and potentially get carried further in anger towards vengeance.)

He had sent His son to be a messenger of love... A light in the darkness... Someone to teach us to live lives that actually mattered... To care about things that will bring us life and vitality and joy...

And what did we do? We killed him.

And what did God do? He didn't rain fire down from heaven. He didn't vaporize us. He didn't cause a second Great Flood like in the days of Noah. **And at that moment, every nation; every tribe; every man and woman; and every descendant from those people; experienced God's grace.**

Matthew 5:45 NLT

For He gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.

God didn't stay His hand because He didn't care, but because He cared so intensely for the people He came to save... His lost, wandering sheep; His beloved, confused children... He stayed His hand. **And by doing so, forever broke the cycle of sin.**

This violence was not met with more violence.

In fact, it was met with **non-violence**... And it was met with **forgiveness**.

Luke 23:34 NLT

“Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”

Jesus wasn’t asking Himself, *“What crime are they committing and what punishment do they deserve?”* He was asking, *“What do I need to do to make these broken people whole again?”*

It went against everything in our human nature; and it was perfect.

The grace of God, demonstrated in its’ fullness through the Cross of Christ.

Today, you might feel a bit like the Prodigal... You’re carrying so much baggage that you can barely stand. The grace of God is here for you. The Father runs down the driveway to meet you where you are, to place a signet ring on your finger (to remind you that you’re His beloved child) and to throw a party in your honor.

Or, if you’ve been a Christian for a while... You might feel like the Older brother. You’re frustrated with grace, you want God to be giving you things and blessing you in ways that God might not intend to bless you... But the grace of God is here for you. The Father is stepping outside of the party to beg you to join in the celebration.

I’ll close by saying that I don’t think we’ll ever grasp the fullness of God’s grace... **But then again, that might just be the beauty of it.**

Let’s pray...