

**STIRRING UP ADVENT:  
RECIPES FOR RELATIONSHIPS  
(2) GOD'S GRACE**

Philippians 1:2-11

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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**PROLOGUE**

Today we continue our Advent series on recipes for relationships--the ingredients God has stirred up in our hearts to form loving, lasting relationships with his people. These stirred-up ingredients spill over into our relationships with one another, all because of Jesus, "through whom we have now received reconciliation." (Rom. 5:11)

**SCRIPTURE**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. {3} I thank my God every time I remember you, {4} constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, {5} because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. {6} I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. {7} It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. {8} For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. {9} And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight {10} to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, {11} having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:2-11 NRSV).

**INTRODUCTION**

God's relationship with us is a model for all healthy, fulfilling relationships. Commitment determines the nature of a relationship and promise determines the future of a relationship. The term for a relationship marked by both commitment and promise is covenant. Without commitment, the relationship is ill-defined or non-existent. Without promise, the relationship has no future. Healthy, fulfilling relationships need covenant.

The second ingredient we need is grace. Jack and Judith Balswick tell us in their book, *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*, that it is especially difficult to separate covenant (which we talked about last week) from grace.

"By its very nature, covenant is grace. From a human perspective the unconditional love of God makes no sense except as it is offered in grace. Grace is truly a relational word. One is called to share in a gracious relationship with God. Grace means unmerited favor." (*The Family*, p. 26)

Grace is what makes a covenant possible. God has given us grace in order for a relationship to exist. Without grace none of us can be in a healthy relationship with God or healthy relationships with one another.

### **1. GRACE IS FREE**

Grace is free. It is given without condition. It is received without having earned it.

Christmas is an especially good time to think about grace since Christmas is associated with giving presents to one another. But in the hustle and bustle of the season we are liable to forget that God is the ultimate gift giver and everything we have we owe to him. We are like the college student who couldn't get home for Christmas, so he sends a set of cheap cuff links to his father with a note reading "Dear Dad: This isn't much, but it's all you could afford."

All of God's gifts to us are undeserved, especially the gift of salvation. In spite of our sinfulness, God gave us his own Son to be the means by which we can be forgiven and made forever right with God. This is a gift of God to be received by faith in Jesus Christ. We are saved by grace.

If we have experienced the grace of God it will shape the way we treat others. God's offer of forgiveness to us becomes the basis for offering forgiveness to others. We are far from perfect and we need to own up to our shortcomings rather than make excuses. A TV weather reporter lost her job because her forecasts were never accurate. When, in an interview for another position, she was asked why she left her last job, she replied, "The climate didn't agree with me."

None of us deserves the love and forgiveness of God but by the grace of God and in spite of our shortcomings we are loved and forgiven. If we appreciate what this means it will produce an attitude of patience and kindness. So many church conflicts are the result of people forgetting about grace. Let us not forget about grace.

The alternative to a relationship of grace would be a relationship based on legalism. Biblically speaking, legalism is the belief that you have to keep all of God's commandments in order to earn your way into heaven. This is rejected by the New Testament and altogether impossible. Mark Twain has explained it this way, "Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out, and your dog would go in."

Sadly, many who would never want their relationship with God to be based on legalism nevertheless treat others this way. Their spouse, child, or friend has to meet certain conditions before they are acceptable, before they can be loved. The Balswicks remind us that such relationships are unhealthy. A relationship without grace is contractual. Instead of relationship, it is law--a relationship based on a rigid contract where persons in the relationship are controlled by fear and guilt.

When a family system is based on the law, the family will find itself disillusioned in the end. A demand for flawlessness only adds guilt to the failure that is inevitable. But in an atmosphere of grace, family members respond out of love and forgiveness for one another and learn to act responsibly in consideration for one another. Grace replaces fear and guilt with freedom to love unconditionally.

## **2. GRACE IS SEEN**

Karl Barth said, "Grace must find expression in life, otherwise it is not grace." In other words, grace needs to be seen. It needs to be demonstrated in tangible ways.

Our Scripture reading provides a wonderful example of grace being seen and experienced among Christians. The early Christians covenanted with each other to be there for one another whatever the circumstances. Paul experienced such covenant throughout his ministry. In the opening part of his letter, Paul gives thanks for grace--the grace and graciousness shown to him by the Philippian congregation.

Showing grace does not have to be complicated. In her book, *A Gift For God*, Mother Teresa shares an occasion when some people came to Calcutta and asked for advice to make life worth living. In her own simple way, Mother Teresa said:

Smile at your wife.

Smile at your husband.

Smile at your supervisor.

Smile at your screaming children.

Smile at each other.

After hearing such advice, one of the women responded to Mother Teresa by saying, "Are you married?" Mother Teresa graciously took the question and responded, "Yes, I am married to Jesus, and sometimes I find it very difficult to smile at him."

Of course, grace is not always easy to show. But we are people in relationship with God and with one another. Showing grace demonstrates this. Go ahead and say, “Merry Christmas!”, if you like. But don’t forget to smile.

### **3. GRACE IS SHARED**

Paul says:

“In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (1:4-5 NIV).

“From the first day” may simply be a figure of speech or it may be that Paul is referring to the literal first day he met someone who would become part of the church in Philippi. The person he met was a business woman named Lydia (Acts 16:14). She responded in faith to the Good News concerning Jesus Christ. She then expressed her faith through a willingness to extend hospitality to Paul and his colleagues and support the work of spreading the message of Christ. She was so grateful for what Jesus Christ had done for her that she wanted others to hear this Good News, also.

Later on in Acts we read that the city jailer also came to faith in Christ (16:34) and, like Lydia, expressed the same willingness to extend hospitality and support the work of spreading the Good News of Christ.

Partnership, as it is used here, means participation, that is, participating together in the life of grace which Jesus Christ offers. The term translated “partnership” was also used in an economic sense for those who “share” monetarily, such as the financial help the Philippians gave for the work of spreading the Gospel (4:10-20).

So participation means fellowship with Christ and other believers and it means the sharing of material resources. In the New Testament, having the first, implies the second. Therefore, the Philippians were true partners. They were not only dedicated to the same Lord as Paul, but they gave of whatever resources they had in order to further the Gospel. And Paul was ever so grateful for that partnership.

Roger Sonnenberg comments on the partnership between Paul and the Philippians Christians this way:

Grace begets grace, O God. I've witnessed it. From the Starbucks stories concerning drive- thru pay-it-forwards, to Bill Gates-ish philanthropy, I have seen grace-gotten transform into grace-given. So did St. Paul. His beautiful love letter to his friends in Philippi bespeaks the transforming power of your grace. Paul had seen them accept your gracious call—a call

to forgiveness, to loving relationships, to eternal life. And now Paul was experiencing the graciousness of the Philippian Christians. The outpouring of their gifts for Paul's important ministry astounded Paul. (It is no surprise that Lydia was a member of that congregation!) Grace begets grace. It has got to be shared.

### **CONCLUSION**

The grace we have freely received from God needs to be shown, needs to be shared. Now I admit that it is not easy to gracefully respond to those who, during this season, have abandoned all graciousness themselves. However, that does not take away our responsibility and privilege as God's people--Christmas people--those who understand and live the Christmas story, to be gracious. So let our prayer be that we would grow in God's love, and in so doing grow in grace and love toward others.