

AGENTS OF GRACE

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As adolescents begin their journeys to adulthood, there are many hardships and bumps in the road to trip them up. We live in a society where the demands on adolescents from school, sports, media, parents, and adults in general are getting higher and higher; while the average age of entering into an independent adulthood is becoming later and later—even into the late 20's. The severe pressures that our culture is placing on young people have forced many of them to strive for the high standards we have set for them, but they are often paying a costly price. For example, it was estimated that in 2002, up to 24% of all high-school-aged females had some type of eating disorder.

So what can we, the Church, do in order to stop the pain that society is inflicting on them? We must offer them what only we have to offer...grace. Gordon Macdonald says, "The world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace" (Yancey. 15). If that is true, then grace should be our message. Grace is a word that is used over 125 times in the New Testament, and we should be as desperate to show grace to the world as young people are desperate to receive it. But, what exactly is grace and how does it affect youth ministry?

Grace is translated from the Greek word, "charis," which means, "that which brings pleasure, delight, or causes a favorable regard" (Vine W.E. 499–500). Millard Erickson says that, "By this we mean that God deals with his people not on the basis of their merit or worthiness, what they deserve, but simply according to their need; in other words, he deals with them on the basis of his goodness and generosity" (Erickson. 320–321). I would venture to say that grace is not only God's choosing not to give us what we deserve, but also giving us something that we don't deserve. For example, we all know that according to Romans 6:23, what we deserve is death; "the wages of sin is death." Thankfully for us, God didn't give us what we deserve—God gave us grace: "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Grace is a free gift from God that we don't deserve and can never earn. As Philip Yancey says, "There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less" (70). That truly is a cause for delight and rejoicing, but the problem is that most young people don't think of pleasure or delight when the word church is mentioned. I would guess that their first thoughts would more likely be along the lines of boring, stuffy, or holier-than-thou. I think the reason is that many of us have simply not come to a clear understanding of grace. Have we ever really stopped and examined the ministry of Jesus? Have we ever noticed that he went out of his way to spend time with and minister to the "scumbags" of society? He even hung out with the tax collectors and "sinners," but when the Pharisees confronted him about his behavior, he replied: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick... For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt 9:12–13). Jesus' desire was for the lost, the messy, and the rejects of society.

Is that our focus as well? I'm sure many of us have heard the old adage, "You have to catch a fish first before you can clean it." While that may not be the most theologically sound statement, because we should not try to "catch" the lost, I believe it is true that most of us want them to clean up their act before they start coming to church. After all, church/youth group can get messy when people start bringing their problems. Plus, it's hard work to walk with and minister to a young person who has a lot of "baggage" and issues to work through. But if we don't, who will?

Walk with them we must. We need to teach them about grace by first experiencing grace ourselves, and then modeling it for them. So what does grace look like? One of the greatest stories of grace ever told is the parable of "The Lost Son," in Luke 15:11–32. In this parable it is only after the younger of two sons has disowned and dishonored his father, and "13squandered his inheritance in dissolute living," that he finds himself at rock-bottom and decides to come back and beg his father for mercy. The father, however does not show him mercy, he shows him grace! "20 But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him... 22 The father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate." The name of this parable is "The Lost Son," but that is only part of it. I tend to see it more as being about the father's heart. And as our heavenly Father's heart is clearly for his lost and estranged children, so we, as his ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18), must pursue them and extend to them the warm embrace of grace.

As we look closely at verse 20 and examine the father's actions, I think that there are some very practical applications that we can relate to our own lives and ministries. First of all, we see that the father saw his son while he was still a long way off. Philip Yancey depicts this scene as the "Lovesick Father" who is "standing before the plate-glass window in his living room, staring out into the darkness," waiting for his child to come home (56). I believe that God is telling us that we need to open our eyes and see the estranged sons and daughters all around us trying to find their way home. We need to be watching. Jesus said, "Look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting" (John 4:35). All around us the fields are white and ready to be harvested, but how often do we just walk past. It may be that we're too busy with "our ministry" to see those right in front of us. We need to first open our eyes, look around us, watch, and wait for those who are hurting.

Secondly, verse 20 says that when the father saw him, he was "filled with compassion" for him. Compassion was one of the characterizing aspects of Jesus' life and ministry. 36 "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few" (Matt 9:36–37). Jesus' heart was moved with compassion when he saw the crowds of lost and helpless people. I can't imagine the overwhelming pain and anguish that he must have felt as he saw his sons and daughters longing and desperate for someone to bring them the good news of grace. Is that the way our hearts break for those who are entangled in the web of sin and resort to dining with the swine? If the answer is no, than I think it's time to ask God to give us his heart and to fill us with his compassion.

Jesus here again uses the illustration of the plentiful harvest, but he says that the workers are few. He then tells his disciples something very profound, "Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Vs. 38). He told them to pray. Pray for workers to be filled with compassion and to go out to the harvest and reap those who are ready. Then, in the very next passage, Jesus gathers the twelve disciples to him and sends them out. Was Jesus playing a trick on them? Why did he tell them to pray for workers, when he knew all along that they were going to be the ones to go? I believe that it's because something unexplainable happens when we pray. When we see those in need and begin to pray for them and ask for someone to reach out to them, it's as if God removes from us our heart of stone and puts in us a heart of flesh (Eze 11:18). He gives us his heart. We begin to see people

as he sees them, and he starts to fill us with compassion for them. And more often than not, we're the ones that he uses to reach them. Prayer is the preparation for compassion. So we need to have open eyes and we need to pray for compassion.

Next, we see that the father actively pursued his son as he ran to meet him. It's important to understand that in that culture it was a disgrace for the man of the house to run. In fact, you could tell the social standing of a man by the speed of his walk. The more prestigious the man, the slower the walk. This "lovesick father" however, threw all social standards to the wind and became as a little child and ran to greet his son.

Jesus also speaks of God's pursuit of his estranged in the story of The Lost Sheep (Matt 15:3-7). Here the shepherd leaves his flock of 99 and goes searching for his one lost sheep. It's a great temptation for us to wait for the person who has hurt us to come and apologize. After all, as in the case of the father, his son was the one who strayed, therefore he should be the one to make the first move toward reconciliation. That sounds like a just argument by the world's standards, but not so in the Kingdom of God. Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often shall I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times" (Matt 18: 21-22). Just as Jesus "came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10), so we need to continue his work and actively seek out those who are lost, even those who have hurt us personally.

Finally, the father "put his arms around him and kissed him" (Vs. 20). Then in verse 22 he gave him a robe, a ring, and sandals for his feet. Apart from what each of those items symbolizes, the father made the son feel welcome and safe. How good that embrace must have felt to the son. I would venture to say that it was his first genuine, loving embrace since he left home. I wonder how many hurting people, at this very moment, are longing for that kind of embrace. I wonder how many people who pass through the doors of our churches or youth programs would give anything to be greeted with the open arms of grace, but instead receive a cold shoulder because they don't meet our standards or because we don't know how to read what they need. I believe that if we are to minister with young people and help them traverse the mountains of difficulties that life hurls at them, then we need to be agents of grace—grace to those in the church who slip and fall, and grace to those lost children who are searching for a parent's love. We must open our eyes, pray for compassion, run to those who are searching, and offer them a warm embrace.

Because if we don't, who will?

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