

"GRACE ABUSERS"*{Romans 5:12-6:1}*

Trinity Presbyterian Church

April 27, 2008

Found in our text of the morning are several verses that have created incredible discussion and controversy for centuries.

"The Law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin has reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.

"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?"

Romans 5:20-6:1

There are those who read into these verses license to continue to live in sin because our sins are all covered by the grace of God. So, the logic is, if we are saved by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, then we are free to live as we please—continuing in our sinful lifestyle because after all we're saved—what have we to lose?

As a matter of fact, Martin Luther's interpretation of these verses has been a point of controversy by Biblical scholars for nearly 500 years. Luther wrote to his friend Melancthon:

"Be a sinner and sin vigorously...it is sufficient that we recognize through the wealth of God's glory, the lamb who bears the sin of the world; from this, sin does not sever us, even if thousands, thousands of times in one day we should fornicate or murder."

Whoa! That stopped me in my tracks and I hit the books because that certainly wasn't my understanding about the Biblical meaning of grace—that seemed like what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called, *"cheap grace."*

It is **what is known as ANTINOMIANISM**—the view that one can be a believer yet have no moral responsibility to obeying God's Word and/or serving Christ as Lord; basically saying that a Christian is free to live just as they please! Antinomianism is "cheap grace" that offers "cheap salvation" with no cost and no repentance!

I've spent considerable time this past week reading and studying what others—whom I respect—have written; i.e., John R. W. Stott, C. S. Lewis, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Lloyd-Jones, Paul Tournier, and most especially Philip Yancey.

Yancey in the chapter entitled *"Loopholes"* from his book, *"What's so Amazing about Grace?"* tells a wonderful story.

"Historian and art critic Robert Hughes tells of a convict sentenced to life imprisonment on a maximum-security island off the coast of Australia. One day, with no provocation he turned on a fellow prisoner and beat him senseless. Authorities shipped the murderer back to the mainland to stand trial, whereupon he gave a straightforward, passionless account of the crime. He showed no sign of remorse and denied having held any grudge against the victim. 'Why, then?' asked the bewildered judge. 'What was your motive?'

The prisoner replied the he was sick of life on the island, a notoriously brutal place, and saw no reason to keep on living. 'Yes, yes, I understand all that,' said the judge. 'I can see why you might drown yourself in the ocean. But murder? Why murder?'

"Well, I figure it's like this,' said the prisoner. 'I'm a Catholic. If I commit suicide I'll go straight to hell. But if I murder I can come back here to Sydney and confess to a priest before my execution. That way, God will forgive me!"

"The Australian prisoner's logic was a mirror image of Prince Hamlet's who would not kill the king at prayer in the chapel lest he be forgiven his foul deeds and go straight to heaven!"

GRACE ABUSE

We all love the story of God's infinite grace—especially as portrayed in the parable of the Prodigal Son. But what happens after the reconciliation in this story is left to our imagination.

- ✚ Was the prodigal still rebellious once he returned?
- ✚ Was the brother who stayed at home ever reconciled with the father—or, did he demand his inheritance and take off?
- ✚ What happened the morning after the celebration?

There is an incredible temptation to misuse God's gift of grace—it's what I've chosen to call "*grace abuse!*"

There's a dangerous tight-rope-walkway here as pointed out by Martin Lloyd-Jones...

"There is thus clearly a sense in which the message of 'justification by faith only' can be dangerous, and likewise with the message that salvation is entirely of grace...

"I would say to all preachers: If your preaching of salvation has not been misunderstood in that way, then you had better examine your sermons again, and you had better make sure that you really are preaching the salvation that is offered in the New Testament to the ungodly, to the sinner, to those who are enemies of God. There is this kind of dangerous element about the true presentation of the doctrine of salvation."

Yancey writes: "*Grace has about it the scent of scandal.*" When someone asked theologian Karl Barth what he would say to Adolf Hitler, he replied, "*Jesus Christ died for your sins!*" Hitler's sins? Stalin's sins? Chairman Mao's sins? Has grace no limit?

Before you respond, think for a moment of those whom God chose to use. Two giants of the Old Testament, Moses and David both committed murder, yet, God still loved them. The Apostle Paul wrote in I Timothy 1:13-15 of the miracle of his forgiveness—

"Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worse!"

MARY'S STORY

This concept of “*grace abuse*” was driven home to me one day when a woman—whom I’ll call “Mary”—came into my study. She proceeded to tell me that she was a “*Spirit-filled*” believer [*I’ve never been quite sure why there are those who feel it necessary to state that publicly. I’ve always felt that if/when one is indeed “Spirit-filled” it would become evident by the “Fruit of the Spirit” that was evidenced in their life and they didn’t have to boast about it.*]

Mary and her husband were members of the congregation—both of whom were believers and quite involved in the life of the church. She told me that the Holy Spirit was leading her to divorce her husband and was concerned as to whether or not God would forgive her of something as awful as she was about to do.

How was I to respond? How was I to dissuade her from committing a terrible mistake? Especially if the thought was, “*I can do this—it’s ok—and God will forgive me and I can get on with my life!*” [*That takes us back to Robert Hughes’ story and ask, what’s to keep a convict from murdering if he knows in advance he’ll be forgiven? This is good fodder for discussion in your classes following worship and/or over the lunch table today!*]

Listen to what C. S. Lewis has to say on the subject...

“St. Augustine says, ‘God gives where He finds empty hands.’ A man whose hands are full of parcels can’t receive a gift.” Grace, in other words, must be received. Lewis goes on to explain that “*grace abuse*” stems from a confusion of condoning and forgiving: ***“To condone an evil is simply to ignore it, to treat it as if it were good. But forgiveness needs to be accepted as well as offered if it is to be complete: and, a man who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness!”***

My response to “Mary” was simply this: ***“Can God forgive you? Of course! God uses murderers and adulterers...scoundrels like Peter and Paul were leaders of the early church...but...FORGIVENESS IS OUR PROBLEM, NOT GOD’S!”***

When we sin it distances us from God—as in the story of the Prodigal—and [*listen carefully*—there is no guarantee we will ever come back. You are concerned about forgiveness now...but **will you come back for it later? That will require what the Bible calls REPENTANCE!**

I concluded the conversation by saying, I was convinced that the Holy Spirit wasn’t the One prompting her to make this decision!

But...she went ahead with the divorce

- ✚ Neither she nor her husband—to my knowledge—are involved in any church today.
- ✚ You decide if it was the right decision.

✚ You tell me—was it the Holy Spirit who led this woman?

JOHN 8—THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY

Yancey writes that there are two types of guilty people—**those who acknowledge their wrongs...and those who don't**. We see both of these groups in the John 8 passage of Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in adultery.

The woman is humiliated—the man involved is nowhere to be found. The Pharisees are anxious to trap Jesus between Moses' Law and Roman Law. They wish to stone the woman—will He agree with the Law of Moses? Will He defy Roman Law?

Jesus actually doesn't respond verbally at first. He bends down and writes on the ground with his finger. *[In his movie of Jesus' life, Cecil B. DeMille depicts Him spelling out the names of various sins: adultery, murder, pride, greed, lust...! Each time Jesus writes a word, a few more Pharisees file away.]* What Jesus wrote is up for conjecture.

The audience was comprised of two categories of people: the guilty woman—caught red-handed...and, the “righteous” accusers who are the religious professionals! But, **when Jesus speaks, He demolishes one of those categories: “If any one of you is without sin, let them be the first to throw a stone at her!”**

Again He stoops and one-by-one the accusers slip away...and soon the only two remaining are Jesus and the woman. He asks her: **“Where are they? Has no one condemned you?”**

She replies: **“No one!”**

He then says to her: **“Then, neither do I condemn you...Go now and LEAVE YOUR LIFE OF SIN!”**

No cheap grace here!

Jesus replaces the two categories: *righteous and guilty*, with **two different categories: sinners who admit and sinners who deny!**

...the woman admitted her guilt

...far more problematic are those who like the Pharisees
deny or repress their guilt

Dr. Paul Tournier says: *“God blots out conscious guilt, but He brings to consciousness repressed guilt!”*

So, I ask you this morning—with whom do you identify in this story—the accused or the accusers? I must confess that I'm more the accuser—cloaking my sins under my robe of respectability. I can only advance the Kingdom of God when I become like the woman—trembling, humbled, without excuse—my palms open to receive God's grace!

REPENTANCE

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, *“The Cost of Discipleship”* wrote...
“Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church! Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjack’s wares...it is grace without price...grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian ‘conception’ of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins! No contrition is required! Cheap grace means the justification of sin WITHOUT THE JUSTIFICATION OF THE SINNER!”

But it was Jesus who said: ***“Unless you REPENT, you will PERISH!”***
Repentance means a “change of mind” that results in a “change of direction!”

When the Prodigal “came to his senses” and remembered home and his father, he turned—changed directions—headed for home and there was the celebration!

It is God who through the Holy Spirit awakens the guilt within us that generates the desire to turn towards Him.

CONCLUSION

Grace is not a license for immorality! Yancey says that *“grace is the healing counterforce to sin!”*

Peter calls the believer to ***“grow in grace!”***

Walter Trobisch wrote, *“Christ accepts us as we are, but when He accepts us, we cannot remain as we are!”*

So, going back to the verse that I quoted in the beginning of my message...

“Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more!”

The question I’ve been wrestling with this morning is: *“Why be good if you know in advance you will be forgiven?”*

So, let me quote from Romans 6:1-2 and 14 that gives us the answer to this question...

“What shall we say then? Shall we continue to sin that grace may abound? Certainly not. How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law but under grace!”

Why would one who has been set free from bondage wish to return to that from which they were delivered?

I’ll have more to say about this next time—in the meantime, take time to read Romans 6.