

Your Sins Are Forgiven!

Insoo Kim

July 5, 2009

The Outrageous Claims of Jesus
John 8:3-11, Luke 14:12-24, 15:11-32

One of the most striking stories in the Bible, for me, is found in Luke chapter 7. It is the story about a woman, who the author Luke makes the deliberate point to describe as a “sinful woman.” This woman hears that Jesus was eating at the house of this religious leader, a gathering where people of her caliber were clearly not welcome. But still, she must see Jesus. As she gets closer to this house where Jesus is eating, she sees that there is a crowd gathered around this house. And seeing the crowd, her heart sinks. She sees how people are looking at her with disgust in their eyes. She can feel on her skin their indignant judgment. She can taste in her mouth their foul whispers and murmurs. But still, she pushes through. She has come here on a mission. She makes her way through the crowd, carrying in her hands the most valuable thing that she owns, a jar of perfume that is worth about a year’s salary. And quietly, with love and adoration in her heart and tears of joy in her eyes, she walks right up to Jesus, gets on her knees, and begins clean the feet of Jesus with her tears and her hair. And after all the dirt has been wiped clean from his feet, she gently kisses them and lavishly pours this precious perfume on the feet of Jesus.

We do not know for sure exactly what had happened in this woman’s life. We do not know for sure what Jesus said to her or did for her before this encounter. But what we do know is this: This woman experienced something so deep and profound in her life that she was willing to endure the shame and scorn of the unforgiving public, to



humiliate herself by getting on her knees and cleaning someone’s feet with her tears and her hair, to sacrifice the most treasured thing in her life as an extravagant gesture of love, because she has experienced the extravagant love of God. She did absolutely everything in her power to express in an outwardly manner all that was happening deep in her heart.

In the brief time that we have together tonight, I want to talk to you about what I believe to be the most outrageous thing about the Christian faith, and that is grace.

I believe that there is no greater truth in the entire Bible than the fact that the God that we worship is a God who is extravagantly gracious. Grace is a central tenet of the Christian faith, and it is found everywhere in the Bible.

John 1:17

For the law was given through Moses; **grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.**

John 1:14

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only [Son], who came from the Father, **full of grace** and truth.

Titus 2:11

For the **grace of God has appeared** that offers salvation to all people.

Ephesians 2:8

For it is **by grace you have been saved**, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Our God is a gracious God! Our God is a marvelously gracious God! And until we know this truth, until we experience this truth in our heart of hearts, until we feel this truth in our bones, I do not believe that we can truly call ourselves Christians. But if we do know this truth, if we have experienced this truth in our heart of hearts, if we feel this truth in our bones, than it seems to me that the most natural thing for us to do as Christians is to be on our knees, shedding tears of joy, wiping the feet of Jesus, sacrificing all that we hold dear in our lives, simply so that we can say to him, “Thank you for your grace!” And our extravagantly gracious God, whispers to us a most outrageous claim, the very words that Jesus speaks over this woman who washes his feet with her tears: “Your sins are forgiven!”

This is grace! This is grace! As I have been preparing to teach tonight, I found it difficult to put into words all that I wanted to say. And grace is not a topic that you can simply lecture about. Jesus poured out grace everywhere, and yet he never defined what grace is. Actually he rarely used the word. Instead he told stories to teach people about grace. So what I am going to do tonight, following the model of Jesus, is to share with you what grace is by showing you three images of grace, as you can see them up here on stage. With each image is a story, which I hope will allow you to not merely understand in your head what grace is, but to experience in your heart, a little taste of what grace feels like. So before we continue, please bow your head and pray with me. Let’s pray.

Image of the Adulterous Woman

The first image of grace is this one: It is an image depicting a woman who was caught in adultery. She has just been called out and publically shamed for her grievous sin. The religious leaders of the town have brought judgment upon her and have condemned her. And now, half naked, she is sitting on the floor sobbing, with no one to turn to.

Many of you have probably read the book called *The Scarlet Letter* written by Nathaniel Hawthorne. In the story, which takes place in the 17th century, a woman named Hester



is caught in the act of adultery. She becomes pregnant and gives birth to her lover's child, but she refuses to reveal the identity of the man, who happens to be a religious leader in the town. And as punishment for her sin of adultery, Hester is imprisoned and forced to wear the letter "A" on all of her clothing. The letter "A" of course, stood for "Adultery," the color of it was scarlet, symbolizing sin. And this most cruel and unusual form of punishment gave her no escape from her sin. Everywhere she went, everyone knew who she was and what she had done. And if that wasn't punishment enough, for a few hours

every day, she was let out of the prison cell and led to the middle of a busy marketplace, and there she stood on a raised platform wearing the scarlet letter on her dress, clutching this tiny baby tightly in her arms, on display for the whole world to see that she was a sinner.

I bet that many of you here tonight can relate to Hester. What letter are you wearing on your chest tonight? Are you wearing a letter "A" for "Anger"? Or is it the letter "L" for "Lust"? Or is it "P" for "Pride," or maybe "J" for "Jealously"? Or maybe "U" for "Unforgiveness"? Or maybe "A" for "Alcoholic" or "D" for "Drug Addict"? Thank God that the world can't see the letters on our chest! Can you imagine living in a world like that? Everywhere you go, people know who you really are and what you are really like when no one is watching. Can you imagine living in a world like that? And yet, this is Hester's world. It is a world stripped of grace, where everything that you do wrong determines who you are, where your sin is your identity. This is a world stripped of grace.

In John chapter 8, there is a story very much like the one that is told in *The Scarlet Letter*. It too, is a world stripped of grace. And it is into this story, Jesus enters. And when Jesus enters a story, everything changes. Let's read this story together. Please turn with me in your Bible to John chapter 8:3-11.

John 8:3-11

3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.

10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Like Hester, the woman in this story is caught in the act of adultery. And the religious leaders of the town decide to bring her to Jesus to see what he would do and what he would say. They say to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. Moses commanded us that we should stone such woman. Now what do you say?"

Now this woman, in the absolute pit of her life, with everyone about to stone her to death, with no one standing up for her, in the midst of the violence and hatred, this woman hears the words of Jesus that seem too good to be true: "Neither do I condemn you!" And these words are coming from the only person who was without sin, the only person in the world who could have actually thrown the first stone at this woman, from this Jesus, she hears these marvelous words: "Neither do I condemn you!" This is what grace sounds like. And if this encounter with Jesus teaches us anything about grace, it is this:

Grace is Unnatural!

Grace is unnatural! Grace is an utterly un-human concept. It goes against every instinct in us to believe because it is such an unnatural thing. The math of grace just does not add up. Grace is not for the righteous, but rather, grace is for sinners! Grace forgives the unforgivable. Grace loves the unlovable. Grace seeks out the lowest of the low and brings them to the highest of the highs. Grace makes no attempt to appease the intellectual barrier, but it cuts right through to the heart. God's grace is absolutely free, with no strings attached whatsoever. Grace may sound too good to be true, and grace may seem completely unnatural, and yet, thanks be to God, grace is absolutely, extravagantly true! Do you know that?

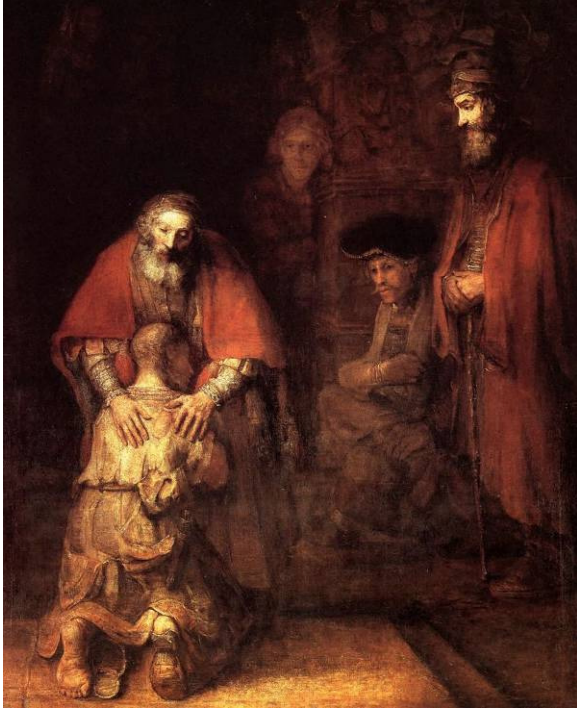
No matter what letter is on your chest tonight, no matter what you've done, no matter what kind of life you've lived, you are never beyond the reach of grace. God's grace is for you, right now, right here, just as you are! Do you know that?

Grace exists only because sin exists. For you see, in a world without sin, grace is an unnecessary gift. Grace exists because of sin. Better yet, grace exists because of sinners, because of people like you and me! Do you know that?

Some of you here tonight need to hear that and let that truth sink in. Maybe, just maybe, the reason you are here tonight is because God knew that you needed to hear that. Grace is for you! Grace is for you! Grace is for you!

Image of the Prodigal's Brother

The second image of grace is this one: This painting is a masterpiece created by the renowned artist, Rembrandt in 1662. It is called "The Return of the Prodigal Son" which is a depiction of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which is found in the book of Luke. In



the painting, you can clearly see this incredible love exchange between the father and the prodigal son. In the background there is a servant and one other man who is most likely a friend of the father. And I don't know if you can see this or not, but way in the background, there is another woman, probably another servant. And standing off to the side, with his hands clasped, is the older son, the prodigal's brother. And that is who I want to talk about now.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is a famous story which I am sure you've heard many, many times. The focus of this story is the incredible interaction between the prodigal son and the father. But tonight, as we read this story, I would like you to pay close attention to the prodigal's brother. Pay attention to his words, his actions, and his

attitude. So turn with me to Luke chapter 15:11-32. Let's read.

Luke 15:11-32

11 Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. 17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' 20 So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. 25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother

has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 31 "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

It is such a beautiful story! What an amazing story about the grace of God. What an incredible depiction of what our heavenly father is like. And yet, in this story is this weird character, the prodigal's brother, who seems completely out of place in the story. He seems to be the only person in the story who does not realize what the point of the story is. He goes against everything that the story is trying to teach. And yet *he*, more than the prodigal, seems to portray how most of us Christians view grace, as revealed in these words found in verse 29:

Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders!

The prodigal's brother sees his father's extravagant grace towards his undeserving brother, and instead of joining in the celebration, instead of lovingly embracing his brother who had come back home, instead he gets angry, indignant, and jealous, and what comes out of his mouth is, "All these years I've been slaving for you!" How many of us have said *that* before? "All these years I've been slaving for you!" I don't believe there are words that more clearly demonstrate a complete misunderstanding of who God is and what grace looks like. "All these years I've been slaving for you!" You can say that these words are the very definition of "ungrace." This is what ungrace sounds like. And foundational to ungrace is a failure to understand this profound truth about grace:

Grace is Unfair!

Grace is radically unfair! In every sense of the word, grace is unfair! There is absolutely nothing fair about grace.

It seems fitting, in many ways, that it was the older son in the parable who has a hard time with grace, because in most families, it is the oldest child who carries the most amount of responsibilities. He or she is usually the one who helps around the house the most, who goes out of his way to make his parents happy, to make sure that there is harmony and unity in the family. He or she has a strong understanding of what is right and what is wrong, what is praiseworthy and what should be punished, who is lovable and who is not. And I bet a lot of you oldest child here tonight can relate to that.

And maybe you are the youngest child, and you got away with a lot. You had no care in the world because your siblings took care of you, looked after you. You were the one who would always start the fights and yet, somehow always managed to escape from getting punished.

But whether we are oldest child, the youngest child, or the middle child, what first drew all of us to Jesus, what drew us to the Christian faith, was this extravagant love of God, this unnatural grace of Jesus, this mercy that was undeserved and unearned, but somewhere along the way in our journey of faith we became the prodigal's brother. This did not happen in one particular moment in time, but just very slowly, very gradually, little by little over time, without us even being fully aware of it, we became the prodigal's brother.

What happened?

There is this thing in us, in all of us, this fear that if God really knew who we are, that if we stopped performing, that if we stopped doing everything in our power to be "good", that God would stop loving us. Somewhere along the way in our journey, we somehow decided that this grace that we thought was too good to be true, was indeed too good to be true. So we keep trying, in our strength, to become good, to become holy, to become righteous, to earn God's love, and one day, we are surprised to find ourselves echoing the words of the prodigal's brother, "All these years I've been slaving for you!"

Our hearts become hardened. Things that used to break our hearts no longer move us. Things that we used to be passionate about, no longer touch us. Somewhere along the way, our Christian vocabulary became filled with words like, "fair," "right," "earn," "obedience," and "duty." Somewhere along the way, when once our hearts used to burn with love for the homeless, the poor, the broken, we now find ourselves saying things like, "Why can't he just find a job?" "Why does he keep asking for more money?" "Who does he think he is?" "How can he spend his days demanding grace from perfect strangers?" "That is not right!" "That is unfair!" "All these years I've been slaving for you!"

Grace is not only utterly unnatural, but grace is radically and wonderfully unfair. And the best part of it all is that grace is available for both the prodigal and his brother. Grace is for you.

The Image of the Great Banquet

This is the third image of grace: It is a picture of a homeless man that depicts the image the Great Banquet. Let me explain.

In Luke chapter 14, Jesus tells a Parable of the Great Banquet. In the parable, Jesus tells the story of a man who is throwing this incredible banquet, and he invites all the respectable people in town for an evening of fine food and great entertainment. On the day of the great banquet, as is custom, he sends his servants throughout the town to escort the honored guests to the banquet. And to everyone's great surprise, each guest



makes excuses for why they won't be attending the party after all. One says, "I bought a new field, so please excuse me because I need to go check it out. I'm very sorry!" Another says, "I got some cows so I need to go make sure they are okay. I'm very sorry!" And another says, "I just got married, so I won't be coming after all. I am very sorry!" And hearing this, the man throwing the party says to his servants these words that reveal the gracious heart of God:

Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame!

This is the heart of our God. This is the love with which our God loves us. In a world ruled by ungrace, this is God's desire: "Go out quickly into the streets and the alleys of the town, and bring to me all who are poor, all

who are crippled, all who are blind and lame, all who have been hurt, all who have been rejected, all who have been abandoned, all who have been shunned by the world, bring them to me! Bring them to me so that I can lavish upon them my grace!"

The world needs this grace. The world is starving for this message of grace. Grace is what the world desperately needs.

Grace is What the World Desperately Needs

I recently read a wonderful story in Philip Yancey's *What's So Amazing About Grace?* that beautifully illustrates this parable in a modern-day setting. The story was originally written in the *Boston Globe* in June of 1990.

A happy young couple engaged to be married went to the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston to plan out their grand wedding reception. Both having very expensive taste, picked out the finest food and the grandest decorations, absolutely nothing was spared. This was going to be the best day of their lives, and it cost them only \$13,000 dollars. They left a check for half that amount as down payment, and they walked out more excited than ever for their spectacular wedding day.

On the day the wedding invitation was to be put into the mailbox, the bride-to-be heard the words from her fiancé that devastated her. He told her, "I'm just not sure that we should get married!" And with those words, the wedding was called off, and all the invitations that were supposed to go into the mailbox, instead, were dumped into the trash.

After a few days of crying her heart out, the woman pulled herself back together and went to the Hyatt to tell them that the wedding was off. The manager at Hyatt felt terrible, but told her that the contract they signed was still binding, and that if she backed out now, she would only get back a fraction of the down payment. The manager gave her two options: one, she could simply forfeit the rest of the down payment or two, she could go ahead with the banquet.

It seemed absolutely crazy at first, but the more she thought about it, the more she liked the idea of having a big celebration at the Hyatt, not to celebrate a wedding, but a celebration nonetheless. It was only ten years before that this same woman was living in a homeless shelter. She somehow managed to get herself back on her feet, find a good job, and was able to save up quite a nest egg. And what excited her today was the thought of using her savings to throw an all-out party for the down-and-outs of Boston.

And so, in June of 1990, the Hyatt Hotel in Downtown Boston hosted a party such as it had never seen before or since. The main meal of the menu was changed to boneless chicken, "in honor of the groom," and invitations were sent out to all the homeless shelters around town. On that warm summer evening, homeless men, women, and children, people who were used to eating leftover crumbs out of garbage cans were treated to the finest chicken cordon bleu in Boston, served by waiters in tuxedos, all with huge smiles on their faces. The down-and-outs, the vagrants, the drug addicts, the bag ladies, the alcoholics, the panhandlers, the people shunned by society because of the scarlet letter on their dirty clothes, took one night off from their harsh life to sip on champagne, to eat a wedding cake, to dance the night away listening to live big-band melodies.

While I couldn't find any pictures from this spectacular evening, can't you just imagine all the faces in that grand banquet room? Like a child going to Disney World for the first time, can you see the huge smiles on their faces walking into this fancy room? Can you hear their joyful laughter? Can you see their eyes just popping out as this incredible food is being served? Can you see their hearts learning to feel again, learning to hope again? This is the power of grace! This is what the world desperately needs.

Earnest Hemingway tells a story about a Spanish father who decides to reconcile with his son who had run away to Madrid. Now remorseful, the father takes out this ad in the local newspaper: "Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven! Signed Papa." Paco, of course, is a common name in Spain, and when the father goes to the square he finds 800 young men named Paco, all waiting for their fathers. All desperate for grace.

When Grace Calls

Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more. Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. Grace means that God already loves as much as an infinite God can possibly love. Do you know that?

In Romans 5:8 Paul writes these incredible words:

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: **While we were still sinners,** Christ died for us.

It doesn't say Christ died for us once we were able to stop sinning. It doesn't say Christ died for us once we became good people. It doesn't say Christ died for us once we got our act together. It says that while we were *still* sinners, *still* in the midst of our filth, *still* in the midst of our brokenness, that Christ died for us to demonstrate his extravagant love for us! This is grace! And this grace is for you!

When grace calls, 800 Pacos run out looking for the father. When grace calls, the Hyatt Hotel in downtown is transformed into a great banquet hall to serve the poor and the



hungry. When grace calls, we heed the voice of Jesus who tells us, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame!"

When grace calls, we no longer say, "All these years I've been slaving for you!" But we are radically and completely transformed from the inside out. When grace calls, we know Jesus is saying to us, "Neither do I condemn you," and "Your sins are forgiven!"

When grace calls, we run to Jesus and kneel before him, wiping his feet with our tears, we sacrifice all that we hold dear, simply so that we can say, "Thank you Jesus, for your grace!" When grace calls, people are set free. When grace calls, lives are transformed. And Joshua House, grace is calling for you tonight!

Your Sins Are Forgiven!

Insoo Kim

July 5, 2009

The Outrageous Claims of Jesus
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Three Images of Grace

1. Image of the Adulterous Woman (John 8:3-11)

Grace is Unnatural

2. Image of the Prodigal's Brother (Luke 15:11-32)

Grace is Unfair

3. Image of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:12-24)

Grace is What the World Desperately Needs