

Galatians 5:1-6
June 6, 2010

Hampton Baptist
Charles R. Smith

“Grace Is Better than We Think”

At a comparative religions conference, the wise and the scholarly were in a spirited debate about what was unique about Christianity. Someone suggested what set Christianity apart from other religions was the concept of incarnation, the idea that God became incarnate in human form. But someone quickly said, "Well, actually, other faiths believe that God appears in human form."

Then, as the story is told, C.S. Lewis walked into the room, tweed jacket, pipe, armful of papers, a little early for his presentation. He sat down and took in the conversation, which had by now evolved into a fierce debate. Finally during a lull, he spoke saying, "What's all this rumpus about?" Everyone turned in his direction. Trying to explain themselves, they said, "We're debating what's unique about Christianity."

"Oh, that's easy," answered Lewis, "It's grace." The room fell silent.

Lewis continued that Christianity uniquely claims God's love comes free of charge, no strings attached. No other religion makes that claim. After a moment, someone commented that Lewis had a point; Buddhists, for example, follow an eight-fold path to enlightenment. It's not a free ride.

Hindus believe in karma, that *your* actions continually affect the way the world will treat you; that there is nothing that comes to you not set in motion by your actions. Someone else observed the Jewish code of the law implies God has requirements, and Islam's code of love does the same.

At the end of the discussion everyone concluded Lewis had a point. Only Christianity dares to proclaim God's love is unconditional, an unconditional love that we call grace. (Collected Illustrations, Brett Blair, Adapted from Rev. Mark Barger Elliott, "Grace Upon Grace." 2003, 0-0000-1000-01)

Grace is better than we think. Nothing we can *do* will earn the grace of God. At the time of Paul's writing, the Christian community was in a quandary. Paul had established the church in Galatia, and later, some Jewish Christians told them they had to do more. Christians in Jerusalem, who had converted *from* Judaism, were expecting all new converts to jump through their same Jewish hoops before becoming Christian. To be Jewish, male babies were circumcised when they were eight days old. Adult converts were also circumcised.

By the way the crow flies (across the Mediterranean Sea), Jerusalem was roughly 500 miles from the region called Galatia. Although they weren't even neighbors, the Jewish Christians had told the new converts in Galatia that circumcision was required to be Christian. They claimed to be *experts* on conversion. In response, Paul told the Galatians of the wonderful riches of God's grace, which is always better than we think.

In verse two, Paul said, "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ is of no benefit to you." Christ does not enter a person's heart because of an *outward* procedure; salvation comes because of an *inward* commitment. God is not interested in whether anyone is circumcised or not, as Paul stated in verse six. God could care less if our hair is red, brown, blonde, black, gray, or colored. It doesn't matter to God if our eyes are blue, brown or green. We are not acceptable to God because we are tall or short. Many make new years' resolutions to lose weight or to exercise more; God is not concerned if we are thin or plump. Some hope to make more money; God loves us whether we are rich or poor. It doesn't even matter to God what color our skin is. God loves us regardless of what we look like; the bottom line is that God loves us as individuals.

God even loves us no matter what we *do*. We cannot *earn* God's love; it comes to us freely. Grace is better than we think and often comes to us unexpectedly. Surprises are wonderful. Pulling out the winter coat and finding a dollar bill in a pocket is a pleasant encounter. Receiving a note, call, or email from an old friend with whom you've lost touch is delightful. Having a child give you an unsolicited hug is priceless. Grace is this kind of unexpected surprise.

My sister and I are very different when it comes to presents. She always wants to know what she is getting for Christmas from our parents. Often, she helps my mom pick out the presents for folks. On the other hand, I don't want to know what anyone is getting, and I certainly don't want to know what's under the tree for me. The element of the unanticipated is welcomed. God's grace is like that: unmerited, unwarranted, and frankly unreasonable. How can God love *everyone* unconditionally? Why does God forgive us each time we ask? How can God love the person on death row, the murderer, and rapist, the same as God loves me? Maybe, because grace is better than we think.

If we are trying to *do* the right thing to earn God's favor, we are no different from those Jewish Christians who declared that circumcision was necessary for salvation. If our church attendance, participation, and even stewardship are ploys to win God's approval, we are fooling ourselves. If we do things for God in hopes that God will like us more, keep us healthy, answer our prayers, then we have forgotten what grace means. Remember, there is nothing we can do to gain God's grace. Money can't buy it; attendance pins won't win it; teaching Sunday School or serving on a committee won't earn us brownie points with God that we can cash in when we are in dire straits. Remember, grace is better than we think.

So why should we give of our time, talents, and resources? Not to *earn* grace, but in *response* to grace. We give in a feeling of love, just as God gives to us *out* of love. If we get locked into a "this for that" situation, we can never win, because we will never out-give God. Nothing we can do will ever match the unparalleled gift of Jesus Christ to us.

Grace is better than we think. For the noted criminal, this comes as great news. But at times, I have wondered how this is better for *me*. In my piety, I have thought that I was better than *those* people who commit the heinous crimes, who don't care what they look like, who don't work hard, who abuse the system, the list goes on and on. But the longer I consider the idea, the more I am convinced that even in my self-declared piety, I am thinking more of myself than I should. Even in my religiosity, I am forgetting about my own sins, those which are not so public. Even in my self-defined holiness, I become convicted of attitudes regarding groups of people, of ambivalence toward creatures who have also been created in the image of God just like me, and of blindness to a world which is in desperate need of the grace and hope that I have hoarded. At that point, I can ask for forgiveness, and remember that grace is better than we think.

As Paul stated, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Grace liberates us from the shackles of disregard for others. Grace emancipates us from the fetters of seeking to earn a smile from God. Grace delivers us from the straight-jackets of having to do everything right. God loves us, just because.

Allow grace to surprise you by being thankful that our God *is* that good. Allow grace to enter your world and even turn it upside down knowing that God loves you no matter what. Allow grace to flow through you to others exhibiting what it truly means to be a Christian. For in doing so, we will appreciate the fact that grace is better than we think.