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## GRACE AT CAMP

Grace is a difficult, perhaps impossible, concept to understand.

In seminary days I had a job working with underprivileged junior-high and high-school kids at the downtown YMCA. On what was then the outskirts of Dallas was a camp we used every Friday night when weather permitted. We would load a bus with forty to fifty kids, head for the camp, and enjoy an evening cookout and games. On special occasions we would sleep there overnight and return Saturday afternoon. Overnight camping trips were usually rewards given to those who had successfully passed certain requirements in our weekly Bible clubs. So the kids who stayed overnight after the others went home were rather special.

One Friday night—or, more accurately, early one Saturday morning—I awoke, startled by some unexplained noise. Soon I discovered that a few of my leaders had sneaked

out of the dorm, gone down to the lake, launched one of the boats, and were having a great time far from shore. Not only was this against every rule in the book, but it was dangerous. When the kids knew I knew where they were, they came immediately into shore. Like dogs with tails between their legs, they meekly went back to bed, wondering what punishment awaited them in the morning.

For me, sleep was now impossible. The night before, I had talked to these Christian young people about forgiving one another. So as I paced the grounds in those early-morning hours deliberating their fate, my own words from the night before kept coming back to me, and back to me, and back to me.

*If I don't give them some punishment, I argued with myself, they will never be impressed with the seriousness of what they did. I have a responsibility to the Y to enforce their rules and punish the violators.*

But the more I debated with myself, talked to the Lord, thought about a number of relevant Bible verses (I discovered again that night that you can prove almost anything with a Bible verse), the more Ephesians 4:32 grew larger and larger in my thinking: "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."

*But, Lord, I can't forgive them; they don't deserve it.*

Neither did I.

*But, Lord, I have to enforce the rules.*

I'm glad, Lord, You didn't.

*But, Lord, if I'm too kind, the kids will think I'm weak.*

I never thought You were weak, only loving.

*But, Lord, first I'll make them promise never to do something like this again, and then I'll forgive them.*

It's a good thing You didn't require that of me, or I never would have been forgiven.

*... just as God forgave me.*

How was that? No conditions or promises ahead of time. No works at the time. No remembrance afterward.

*But, Lord, You're God—You can do anything.*

“You’re My child,” He said. “Imitate Me.”

So with great reluctance and with very little faith, I told the Lord I would.

And then, in the morning, I told the kids.

“You did a terrible thing. It could have had disastrous consequences for yourselves, your families, the Y, and me. But I forgive you unconditionally and completely.”

“You’re kidding,” they said. “There’s got to be a catch somewhere.”

“No,” I insisted, “you are fully forgiven.” And then I told them what the Lord had been saying to me that night about His grace, and how I wanted them to have another taste of that grace.

I didn’t even make them do the cleaning up that day. I did it myself because I didn’t want them to think they could earn even a little bit of that forgiveness.

The rest of the story? As long as those particular kids were in my clubs they were the epitome (as much as kids that age can be) of goodness, helpfulness, and usefulness. They never presumed on that grace.

Grace is indeed a difficult, perhaps impossible, concept to understand.

If it was difficult for those kids to understand an act of grace that forgave one sin on one night, how much more difficult for us to comprehend God’s grace that forgives all our sins every day and night, without preconditions, without works, and without remembrance.

We can learn some important matters about grace from this experience.

First, grace is unmerited favor. As a concise definition of grace, this serves well. More elaborate definitions have their place; but simply stated, grace is unmerited favor. It is undeserved on the part of the recipient. It is unearned and unearnable. Those kids had no claim on my grace. They were in a state of total demerit. Anything I might do could not be in response to any merit they had (for they had none at that

point) nor as a reward for anything they had done (they only deserved to be punished). My grace that night was pure unmerited favor.

Second, grace is not cheap. Grace is expensive. It is free to the recipient but costly to the donor. The only way one may say that grace is not very costly is if the particular benefit costs the donor very little. My forgiveness that night cost those kids nothing. It cost me a lot of agonizing and soul-searching, which is nothing in comparison with what grace cost our Lord. But to use the word *cheap* in the same breath with the grace of God in salvation seems almost blasphemous. It cost our Lord Jesus His life. Some may insult grace, reject it, trample on it, or disgrace it, but that does not lower its infinite value.

Third, it is not easy to believe someone who offers grace. Those kids were dumbfounded when I announced the verdict of grace. They could not believe what they were hearing. And why should they? From day one they had been reared (and so are we all) in a merit system, in which acceptance is based on performance. "Do this and you will be rewarded. Fail to do this and you will be punished." This kind of merit system permeates all of life and most religions. It is not easy to believe someone who says that he or she will do something good for us that we do not deserve.

Human works are like termites in God's structure of grace. They start small, but, if unchecked, they can bring down the entire structure. And what are such works? Anything I can do to gain any amount of merit, little or much. Water baptism could be one such work if I view it not as an important or even necessary result of being saved, but as a requisite to be saved. It is a work even if I insist that it is God who gives me the desire to want to be baptized that I might be saved.

The same is true for surrender. If surrender is something I must do as a part of believing, then it is a work, and grace has been diluted to the extent to which I actually do surrender.

Fourth, grace that is received changes one's life and behavior. Those kids, though really not bad before that night, showed a number of changes in their lives. Their bond to me personally was much stronger. They followed me around like puppy dogs anxious to do whatever they could to please me. And they had new insight into the love of their Savior for them.

The Gospel is the good news of the grace of God to give forgiveness and eternal life. Let's keep that Gospel so full of grace that there is no room for anything else to be added to dilute or pollute the true grace of God.

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*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.*

Psalm 19:14

*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.*

2 Timothy 2:15

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