

Beyond Greeting Cards and the Golden Rule

The Grace Factor – Part IV

Romans 12:14-15

Introduction

On March 11, 1830, a little British girl was doing her lessons with her tutor. Up to that point, this little girl certainly realized that she was a member of a wealthy family – with advantages and luxuries that many others did not have. But on this particular day, the lesson had to do with the royal family. As she studied the genealogical chart in her history book, she suddenly became aware of the astounding fact that she was next in line for the throne. It struck her young mind for the first time, that she would one day be Queen of Great Britain. At first, little Victoria wept with the sudden wave of responsibility and privilege. Then through her tears, she looked up at her tutor and with great determination, delivered those immortalized words, “If I shall be queen, then I will be good!”ⁱ

At that moment, the future Queen Victoria grasped the relationship between where she would sit and how she should act. It dawned on her that who she was going to be should affect what she was going to be like.

In Romans, chapter 12, Paul has begun developing the relationship between who we are (chapters 1-11) with how we act (chapters 12-16). It is as if he wants it to dawn on us that we are heirs of the grace of God and therefore, we must act with grace now!

Paul began his practical comments in verse 3,

For through the grace given to me, I say . . .

In other words, we are the recipients of grace. Remember that grace can be defined simply as,

“God’s unmerited favor”. We do not deserve grace, but we have a relationship with a gracious God.

Now, Paul is about to announce the most radical idea. He is about to give concrete illustrations of the fact that we are to be gracious with everyone else.

Look at verse 14 through the end of the chapter (do not get the idea that we are going to cover it all today – there is no way!), to gain a sense of this radical grace at work.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly.

Do not be wise in your own estimation.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.

“But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.”

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This set of verses will form the substance of a series of studies that I will entitle “The Grace Factor”. They give us the dynamic of grace. They should cause the dawning realization in us all that we have inherited unmerited, undeserved favor from God, so that now, we should become people who are marked in our lives, our conversations, our activities, our relationships as giving grace to people who might not deserve it either.

Let me repeat this as simply as I can,

We are sons and daughters of a gracious God, therefore we should become gracious people.

I am convinced that the distinction between playing church and living out true Christianity is this ingredient – this grace factor. Having received grace from God, we in turn, pour out grace on everyone else.

In case you are wondering who “everyone else” might be, Paul immediately introduces to us three individuals.

- Someone who is causing you heartache.
- Someone who is experiencing heartache.
- Someone who is enjoying happiness.

Let us begin by taking a closer look at the first one.

Grace to Someone Causing You Heartache

Paul dares to suggest in Romans 12:14,

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

This is one of those verses that you read and say, “Yeah, right! Paul doesn’t expect me to take this literally, does he? This verse must be for people like Paul.”

I cannot imagine Paul is saying to you and to me, “Here’s how you respond – expect this kind of treatment and stick it out, but more than that, respond with grace.”

This is, however, exactly what he is saying to us!

Our nature is to do anything but that, right? That is why we nod our heads in agreement with bumper stickers that say things like:

- “Don’t get mad, get even!”
- “Do unto others before they do it unto you.”

Understand that Paul is summarizing something Jesus Christ had said earlier. We know it as the Golden Rule from Matthew 7:12.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

This happens to be a radical departure from human nature. In fact, it might be the greatest test of grace!

In His Sermon on the Mount, the Lord amplified that Golden Rule with enough illustrations that no one could miss it.

Jesus said, as recorded by Luke,

. . . love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you . . .
(Luke 6:27-28)

Nowhere in pre-Christian Greek literature is there any reference to blessing an enemy.

“Blessing” is from the verb “eulogeo,” which gives us our word “eulogy”. You do not say kind things about an enemy – even when he dies. To eulogize a living enemy is unprecedented in both the Greek and Jewish worlds – and in our world.ⁱⁱ

However, the world has had some commendable versions of how to treat enemies.

Five hundred years before Jesus Christ preached His Sermon on the Mount, Confucius and his disciples declared that the one word which should be a rule for life was “reciprocation”. Confucius supposedly said it this way, “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.” That was the common wisdom – Socrates had said basically the same thing, as did Philo, the first century philosopher and theologian.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, this was not what Jesus Christ was saying at all. You do not live by reciprocating whatever someone does to you. According to Christ, the one word you live by is, “grace”.

In the same Sermon on the Mount – in fact, turn to that radical new way of living which Paul is summarizing in Romans 12 – turn to Matthew 5. The Lord will not only deliver the Golden Rule, but He will challenge us to go beyond it. Notice verse 41.

Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.

During the days of Christ, the law of the land gave a Roman soldier the right to force a citizen to carry his gear for one mile. The Jews especially hated this practice, not only because it interrupted their day, but because they had to help their

oppressors – not to mention that they had to touch things that belonged to an unclean Gentile.

Jesus said, “If you get drafted into carrying his gear for one ‘million’,” (which gives us our word for mile), “say to that Roman, something like this, ‘Because I belong to Jesus Christ, I will be willing to not only carry your gear for one mile, but I’ll go beyond your law and carry your stuff another mile.’”

Look back at verse 40.

If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.

Even the Law of Moses did not allow for someone to take someone’s coat. That was an important garment that doubled as a blanket in the cold night.

Christ was saying to be willing to be defrauded not only of your tunic; your undergarment, but the very thing which will keep you warm at night.

In other words, when it comes to your property and your liberty, take the radical step of bestowing grace upon an enemy. They do not deserve it; in fact, you are going beyond what anyone would ever expect you to do.

Look back at verse 38.

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.”

In other words, “You know about the normal law of the land, which is reciprocity, ‘Do unto others as they have done unto you,’ right?”

Continue to verse 39.

But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

What does He mean? Does Jesus mean that we should go around looking for a beating?

No, the Lord is referring to something that is easily lost in our culture.

Let me demonstrate this illustration of being slapped on the right cheek, by asking for a volunteer to join me. By the way, I am going to do the slapping – and you are going to give me grace, okay? This will not hurt . . . for very long!

Now, friends, look at the text again. It says,

. . . whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

The average reader and person on the planet is right handed. So if I really want to let my friend have it, I will use my right hand and slap him in the face.

The only problem is that I am going to be slapping him on which cheek? I am right handed, so that means he gets hit on the left cheek.

How could I, a right handed person – which would be the normal context in this verse – slap him on the right cheek? There is only one way – to reverse my direction and use the back of my hand.

In this verse, Christ is not referring to an attack on one’s body, but an attack on one’s honor. A back-handed slap was considered a terrible indignity; it was being treated with disdain. It would not hurt as much as it would embarrass, and bring shame.

Christ is effectively saying that we should be willing to be ridiculed for His sake.

Thank you for not swinging back, friend!

So, the Lord is saying is that we, as sons and daughters of the King, should be willing to be dishonored and mocked and ridiculed and shamed. And, when someone does something like that to us, we are to turn the other cheek. In other words, we are to accept it, again and again and again and again.

However, that is not natural, is it? It is our nature to retaliate; to dish it back!

I read the hilarious story that appeared in Billy Martin’s autobiography. Billy Martin was the rather volatile manager of several professional baseball teams, including the Yankees. I have heard several versions of this story, but finally found the source and the original true story in his autobiography. He and his friend Mickey Mantle were going hunting in Texas. Mickey Mantle had a friend who would let them hunt on his ranch.

When they reached the ranch, Mickey told Billy Martin to wait in the car while he checked in with this wealthy rancher. Mantle’s friend quickly gave them permission to hunt on his property, but he asked Mickey a favor. He said, “Mickey, I have a pet mule in the barn that is getting old. He’s already deaf and is going blind. I don’t have the heart to put him out of his misery. Would you shoot him for me?”

Mickey agreed. He then went running back to car, pretending to be really angry. He slammed the car door and said, “I can’t believe it – that old man won’t let us hunt on his property. We’ve come all this way for nothing.”

Billy said, “You’re kidding?”

“No, and I’m so mad I’m gonna go in his barn and shoot one of his mules!”

Mickey slammed the gas pedal down and went racing for the barn. Martin protested, “You can’t do that! We’ll get in a lot of trouble.”

Mantle replied, “So what? Just watch me!”

When they reached the barn, Mantle jumped out of the car with his rifle, ran inside and shot the mule. As he was running back, he heard two shots and saw Martin running for the car. “What are you doing?” Mickey Mantle yelled, as Billy dove into the car, his face red with anger.

“I helped you show that old man. I shot two of his cows.”^{iv}

That is the law of the land; the law of the sin nature, “Do unto others as they do unto you,” or “Don’t just sit there and take anything off anybody.”

Many Christians have said:

- “I’m praying that God will give me another job. The people at my job mock my faith and make fun of me. I’m sure God doesn’t want me to have to go through this.”
- “I’m never going to speak to that family member again because they don’t like me; they make fun of me; they don’t appreciate me.”
- “I’m changing schools because there are students who pick on me and ridicule me; they make fun of my religion.”
- “I’m moving to another apartment because my neighbors know I won’t retaliate to the things they say or do because I’m a Christian. I’m not going to take it any more, so I’m moving away.”

Paul summarizes the teaching of the Lord Jesus in Romans 12:14, by challenging us to do the unthinkable; the unimaginable – to move beyond the Golden Rule and,

Bless those who persecute you; bless [eulogize] and do not curse.

Grace to

Someone Experiencing Happiness or Heartache

Romans 12:15 introduces us to two more individuals or scenarios.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

The earlier verse had the definite article which referred to specific people who were persecuting the

believer. In this verse, there are no articles defining any person specifically. Paul is simply saying, “Rejoice with rejoicing ones!” It is an imperative – you could write an exclamation point after each phrase. “Weep with weeping ones!”^v

Christianity does not strip the believer of emotion – whether it is laughter or tears.

One author wrote perceptively, these words,

Christianity is neither denying life’s hardships, nor dulling life’s excitements. Our perspective of eternity in Christ frees us to enter into the full variety of living. Both laughter and tears are appropriate before God.^{vi}

Think of it – God Himself has experienced both emotions! He celebrated at the wedding feast at Cana – we have no reason to believe He showed up and told them to pipe down. It was His sense of humor that responded with sarcastic humor toward the religionists of His day. He laughed.

Rejoice with those who rejoice

The believer who will demonstrate the grace factor is introduced by Paul to the second person – one who is rejoicing. And Paul says we are to, “rejoice with the rejoicing ones”.

Frankly, it is easier to weep with the sorrowful than to rejoice with the successful – especially when we are not enjoying the same success. You can cry with someone you work with when they lose their job, but it is altogether harder to rejoice when they get promoted over you.

“You won’t believe it, I’m your new boss!”

“Well, praise the Lord.”

Have you ever noticed in Sunday school that prayer requests far outnumber praise reports? You can get downright sick of those reports that so-and-so got a raise. That will make your arthritis flare up for sure.

Maturing in grace means that,

. . . if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with [him]. (I Corinthians 12:26b).

It means to adopt the attitude of Paul who wrote, “My joy is when you have joy.” (II Corinthians 2:3b paraphrased)

The opposite of rejoicing with those who rejoice is what?

- Envyng those who rejoice.
- Competing with those who rejoice.
- Avoiding those who rejoice.
- Resenting those who rejoice.

You might ask, “Why is it, Lord, that Your hand of blessing is always on the other person?!”

Maybe for you, this is the greatest test of grace. You can console, but you cannot congratulate.

You are not alone in that struggle. Listen as Paul instructs the church through Titus,

For we also once were foolish ourselves . . . spending our life in malice and envy . . . But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us . . . that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life . . . so . . . be careful to engage in good deeds. . . . avoid . . . controversies . . . and strife and disputes . . . (Titus 3:3-9).

Did you catch that? You are heirs by the grace of God, so avoid envy and strife and disputes.

Like little Victoria, let it dawn on us that we are royal heirs to the throne – and we shall be good!

How? Demonstrate graciousness; rejoice with those who are rejoicing. Ask God to cleanse your motives and your heart of envy, and practice selflessness. It will be awkward and difficult, but it is a command – which means we can.

The problem with demonstrating graciousness in this way is never a matter of cannot, it is a matter of will not.

Paul said in Philippians 4:13,

I can do most of the things through Him [Christ] who strengthens me.

No, Paul said,

I can do all things through Him [Christ] who strengthens me.

How can I do all things? Through Christ who enables me.

Weep with those who weep

Paul now introduces us to the third person in this text, as he continues with another imperative in Romans 12:15b,

. . . and weep with those who weep.

This is going beyond get well cards, though they are nice to get in the mail.

This is the group of friends who painted the home of a single mother – abandoned by her husband. I heard the story only recently, of the way they went into her house while she was away for the weekend, and fixed everything, painted everything, and cleaned everything.

This is the woman who went over and cut and styled the hair of a widow.

This is the group of guys who showed up to mow the grass of a terminally ill man.

It is entering into the world of suffering and caring.

This is the Lord showing up at the funeral of Lazarus. He did not say, “Wipe those tears off your face. What kind of Christians are you anyway? Where’s your faith? Don’t you believe in heaven? C’mon, buck up!”

No. Large tears formed in Jesus’ eyes and rolled down His weathered cheeks. He, the man’s man, if there ever was one, entered into the weeping of those who were weeping.

Jesus Christ never ran from people in grief.^{vii}

He embraced them and wept with them.

Isaiah called the Messiah,

. . . a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; . . . Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried . . . (Isaiah 53:3-4)

By the way, He is still doing this for His people today.

Did you know that to this day, He is still touched with the feelings of your infirmities (Hebrews 4:15)?

This will be true until that day when sorrows will cease and grief will be no more.

Conclusion

Paul introduces to us to three people in Romans 12:14-15, and tells us to give a gracious response to all three.

1. First, we are to respond graciously to one who is experiencing happiness

This person may not feel they need grace at that moment, but you share it with them as you set your own lot in life aside and celebrate their success.

2. Secondly, we are to respond graciously to one who is experiencing heartache.

This person does not feel grace and, in fact, may think grace has departed forever, but you remind them of it and demonstrate it as you enter into their sorrow.

3. Thirdly, we are to respond graciously to one who is actually our heartache; our enemy.

This person does not deserve grace, but you offer it because you understand that grace is best given when given to those who are undeserving.

By the way, do not ever forget that the man writing this letter to the Roman church saw this grace factor acted out in living color. Paul had stood by when Stephen was being stoned to death by enraged people after preaching his first and last recorded sermon on the glory of Christ. Just before Stephen passed out and died, Paul heard Stephen pray,

*. . . Lord, do not hold this sin against them! .
.. (Acts 7:60)*

I am sure he would never forget that.

In fact, the great theologian, St. Augustine, wrote in the fourth century, these words, “The church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen.”^{viii}

Paul was moved along toward faith in Christ by supernatural graciousness in the face of murderous hatred.

There is no telling who will be brought into the body of Christ because of your contagious grace.

Watchman Nee, a Chinese leader and author of the last generation, told the story of a Chinese Christian he knew who owned a rice paddy next to one owned by an atheist, communist. The atheist scorned his Christian neighbor and wanted nothing to do with Christ. This Christian farmer irrigated his paddy by pumping water out of a canal next to his field. He used a leg-operated pump that made the user appear to be seated on a bicycle. Every day, after several hours of pumping, his rice paddy would be covered with water, but when he left his field, his neighbor would remove some boards that kept the water in the Christian’s field and let all the water

flow down into his own field. In this way, he would not have to labor at his own pump.

This continued, day after day. The Christian struggled with anger and resentment, until he finally prayed, “Lord, if this keeps up, I’m going to lose all of my rice and maybe even my field. I have a family to care for. This isn’t right or fair. What shall I do?”

In answer to his request, the Lord impressed upon his mind a challenge to apply the truth of this text. The next morning, he arose much earlier than usual in the predawn hours of darkness, and removed the boards from his field. He then started pumping water into the field of his neighbor. Then, he replaced the boards and pumped water into his own rice field. In a few weeks, both fields of rice were thriving – and the communist, atheist came to faith in Jesus Christ.

That testimony was too unnatural to be dismissed – too gracious to be ignored.

He, and we like him, have ample opportunities to act out who we are, as it dawns on us that we are in line to reign with Christ; we, the royal sons and daughters of God, are in line for the throne!

So then, we shall be good!

We will act in accordance with who we are,

- in the presence of suffering;
- in the presence of success;
- in the presence of sorrow.

We could choose to avoid it all or run from it all or ignore it all, but instead, we choose to endure it and enter into it and embrace it. In so doing, we will demonstrate to all, this amazing dynamic of grace.

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
Praise Him all creatures here below,
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts,
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Amen.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/18/2005 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2005 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.

ⁱ Warren Wiersbe, Live Like a King (Moody Press, 1976), p. 141.

ⁱⁱ Douglas Moo, The Epistle to the Romans (Eerdmans, 1996), p. 781.

ⁱⁱⁱ Haddon W. Robinson, The Solid Rock Construction Company (Discovery House, 1989), p.110.

^{iv} Scott Bowerman, Leadership Magazine.

^v R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (Augsburg Publishing, 1936), p. 774.

^{vi} Grant Osborne, Life Application Commentary: Romans (Tyndale House, 1992), p. 241.

^{vii} Larry Richards, Romans: God's Word for the Biblically-inept Series (Starburst Publishers, 2000), p. 184.

^{viii} James Boice, Romans: Volume 4 (Baker, 1995), p. 1609.