

Grace -- Free or Cheap?

¹The Spirit of the Lord God is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of our God's vengeance; to comfort all who mourn, ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion; to give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, festive oil instead of mourning, and splendid clothes instead of despair. And they will be called righteous trees, planted by the Lord to glorify him. ⁴They will rebuild the ancient ruins; they will restore the former devastations; they will renew the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. ⁵Strangers will stand and feed your flocks, and foreigners will be your plowmen and vinedressers. ⁶But you will be called the Lord's priests; they will speak of you as ministers of our God; you will eat the wealth of the nations, and you will boast in their riches."

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If you were walking down the street and a store advertised a sale with the word "cheap," what would you think? Technically it means that the item is at a lower cost. So you might go in and check it out. But stores don't advertise things as "cheap." That is because cheap can also mean inferior, low quality, not worth it. You may buy something cheap only to have it break the first time you use it. You would say in disgust, "What a cheap thing," and throw it away. So, stores will advertise sales or half off but never use the word "cheap" because cheap often means worthless.

Today we are talking about God's grace. Because God saves us by grace, it is free. It doesn't cost us anything. But we will also learn that grace is not cheap.

I. God's grace is free.

Do you know what June 19th is? It is a holiday though not as popular as the Fourth of July or Christmas. Yet, June 19th is a very special day. It is called "Juneteenth Day" or "Jubilee Day." It goes back to the Civil War. June 19th was the day news of the Emancipation Proclamation reached the last community in the South, that of Galveston, Texas, announcing that the slaves in the Confederate states are free. Why is it called "Jubilee?" We find that answer in our text for today. Our text talks of the year of the Lord. Christians had nicknamed it the Year of Jubilee. So, when these slaves heard of their freedom, they compared it to this Jubilee or year of the Lord in the Bible.

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What is this year of the Lord? If you need a loan today, you probably would put your house or farm up as collateral for the loan. If you couldn't repay the loan, the bank takes over your house or farm. They didn't have banks in the Old Testament as we understand banks. If you needed money, you would sell the farm with the understanding you could buy it back some day. What if you could not make enough money to buy it back? Today they would say tough luck. God had an interesting way of dealing with this. Every fiftieth year would be this Year of the Lord or Jubilee. You get the farm or house back free of charge. Yes, free of charge.

And not just land. Today, if you need money, you took out or a loan or use a credit card which is the same thing. In Old Testament times that was not available. If you desperately needed money, you could sell yourself as slave. If you couldn't make enough money to buy back your freedom, you were set free in this Jubilee Year. This is huge. Pretend that 2022 is the year of the Lord. The bank, the credit cards, the auto loan places would tear up your loans and you owe nothing.

Now, this wasn't merely an odd economic philosophy the Lord is setting up here. Like everything else, this Jubilee pointed to Jesus and what he will do. You heard our gospel reading earlier. Jesus returned to Nazareth, the town where he grew up. In the synagogue they gave him the Bible and he read the text that we have from Isaiah right here today. Then Jesus said, "**Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.**" Jesus said that his coming means it is the Year of the Lord. God is about to cancel and forgive the debt of sin and Jesus is the one who will do that.

Let me illustrate what this means to you. In the parable of the unmerciful servant, a servant was ordered to pay his debts. Some commentators say that the amount he owed was eleven times the gross national product of his country. That is like owing tens of trillions of dollars. Can you imagine owing that much? You couldn't pay it off. No one can. Nor could that servant. Yet his master forgave his debt. It was gone.

That is the debt we owe God. I like an older translation of the Lord's prayer which accurately reflects the original Greek, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." We owe God a perfect, sinless life. We can't come close to giving that to him. We owe

God also for every sinful thought, word and deed. We commit. The only way to pay that is to be punished eternally. What does God do? He forgives us that debt totally and freely in Christ.

That is grace, God gave his son into death to free us from sin, death and the devil. That grace is free. Like the Year of Jubilee when you got your land back for free, we get heaven for free. But understand something. It is free, but it isn't cheap. It costs us nothing. It cost Jesus everything. It cost him his freedom as he became flesh like us. Imagine him as God willfully holding back so much of his godly power. He endured rejection, mockery and spitting. He endured even the shame of the cross. He endured hell. It cost him everything. So grace is free, but it is not cheap.

II. Such free grace isn't cheap.

What does that grace mean to you? Dietrich Boenhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor who was locked up in a German concentration camp because of his outspoken religious beliefs. As he suffered for his belief in Christ and as he contemplated the state of the Christian Church, he concluded that one of the greatest dangers facing the Christian Church was a concept he called "cheap" grace. Cheap grace is when the Christian treats grace as some cheap, worthless thing. He saw that among Christians who were not willing to make a sacrifice for God, unwilling to make a commitment or make any kind of allegiance to Christ.

That was the case in the days of Isaiah. How do we know the people treated God's grace cheaply? By how they treated one another. The poor were abused, the judges took bribes, the leaders did not administer justice, and yet they still came to the temple and claimed to live under God's grace. But God did not accept their hypocrisy. **"Who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations--I cannot bear your evil assemblies. ... They have become a burden to me; . . . When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight."** Grace meant nothing to them.

The people in Jesus' day cheapened God's grace. Look at the people of Nazareth, Jesus' home town. Read on in Luke 4 and see what did they do with their hometown prophet. They became angry at him, dragged him outside of town to a cliff and intended to throw him to his death! Grace was cheap. It meant nothing to them.

And how grace is made cheap today. It is cheapened when we don't commune or listen to God's Word. Grace is cheapened when it is no longer our greatest treasure. It is cheapened when we say, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," but don't want to forgive others. Go back to the parable of the unmerciful servant. The master forgave the servant's debt. You would think he would relish that. But no. He runs into a fellow servant who owed him a small sum. He had him thrown into prison. That's cheap grace. It's cheap because it has no value.

Every day we cheapen God's grace. But this is the year of the Lord's favor and we are still under warranty; Christ died for those sins, too, and such forgiveness works wonders in us. **"⁴They will rebuild the ancient ruins; they will restore the former devastations; they will renew the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. ⁵Strangers will stand and feed your flocks, and foreigners will be your plowmen and vinedressers. ⁶But you will be called the Lord's priests; they will speak of you as ministers of our God; you will eat the wealth of the nations, and you will boast in their riches."**

God rebuilds us. He makes us new. Did you hear what God called you in that last part? He called you priests and ministers. Imagine approaching your spouse not just as a husband or wife but as a minister of Christ, forgiving sin, speaking only that which builds up, being a servant and not the one being served, having love that is totally unselfish and is willing to die for the other. Now imagine that in all our other relationships, child and parent, worker and boss, relative, neighbor, with the stranger. Such does not cheapen grace; it shows the value of grace. It is grace freely received, grace freely given.

Yes, there is a difference between free and cheap. Free means no charge whatsoever. Cheap means it has no value. They don't care if they lose it or not. But grace is not cheap. Christ died to give it to you. It's not cheap, but it is free. May we value it above all else, and may we let its value be known as we forgive and love one another as he first loved us. INJ Amen.