

Garrison Keillor, best known for his Public Radio Show, *Prairie Home Companion*, has spent much of his life concocting heart-warming stories of fictional characters from Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. One of his characters, Grace Tollefson married Alex Campbell back in the 1930s, a man who turned out to be a ne'er-do-well. Everyone tried to tell her, but Grace wouldn't hear it. Grace and Alex married, moved away to the big city and had three kids—Earl, Marlys, and Walter. Life was hard in their marriage and, one day Alex left Grace. Penniless, she was forced to move back home to Lake Wobegon, to live off the kindness of her parents. Moving back home was humiliating. People gave Grace looks that shouted “I told you so”. But one day Grace got a letter from a man in Philadelphia doing research on Scottish nobility, who asked who her ancestors were so he could look it up. Grace wrote the man back, and a few days later another letter came in the mail. Though the envelope was addressed to Mrs. Grace Campbell, the letter was addressed to “Your Royal Highness.” In the letter the man wrote: “Today is the happiest day of my life as I greet my one true Sovereign Queen.” He went on to say that their branch of the Campbell family was first in the line of succession of the House of Steward, the Royal Family of Scotland. Keillor writes: “*Grace and her three children: Earl, Marlys, and Walter. The Royal Family of Scotland living in Lake Wobegon in a green mobile home, furniture donated by the Lutheran church. They were astounded beyond words. Disbelieving at first, afraid to put their weight on something so beautiful, afraid it was too good to be true, and then it took hold—this was grace, pure grace that God offered them. Not their will but His. Grace. Here they were in their same dismal place but everything had changed. They were different people. Their surroundings were the same, but they were different. Years later, the youngest son, Walter, finds out the whole business was a fraud. But he never tells his mother or siblings, because thinking you are royalty, whether anyone else knows it or not, changes a person*”. As the story continues, Grace and her children's lives are turned inside out. They assumed a dignity that was not their own and a sense of vision that lifted them above their circumstances. They treated each other with deeper respect and greater appreciation. They lived with a sense of wonder and their days were filled with hope. (Garrison Keilor, *Leaving Home*).

“*Thinking you are royalty, whether anyone knows it or not, changes a person*”. Garrison Keilor tells us that he started life as a Lutheran; he got that line from Jesus. Jesus put it this way, “Knowing the truth can actually set you free” (John 8:32). God's grace is real. It's true. It is the central revelation of the New Testament. And if you understand it and begin to take it to heart and make God's grace your guide for making daily decisions, grace will transform the way you feel about your weaknesses and failures, the way you see God and his promises, the way you give yourself to other people, and it will change the way you step into the future. You will begin living like a dearly loved, fully forgiven, completely accepted, adult son or daughter of Jesus' Father—his Abba, your Abba! You will make peace with your weaknesses and struggles while believing that every new day is bringing fresh change because Jesus is living within you. You will face confusion and challenges with a quiet assurance that the Holy Spirit will reveal the way, and strengthen you not only to survive, but to overcome every obstacle. And people will see these changes in you. What they'll notice most of all is the love you carry in your heart and you share with everyone, just as they are, not as they should be. Because that is the kind of love that compelled God to wait with longing for you, until the day you came to your senses and decided to come home to his embrace. It's all grace. Amazing grace.

Last Sunday our worship leader Jill, shared what is a commonly-taught definition of grace. GRACE IS GOD'S UNMERITED FAVOR. That's true, but the truth is deeper than what a simple reading might suggest. Here's the message of grace. Grace begins with God. Grace is God's love in action. The Creator of the Universe loves you, just as you are, not as you should be. He knows the truth about the past. He knows your present secrets. Still, he's crazy about you in all your weakness, sinfulness, neediness. His love is extreme. His desire to live with you in trust and love, to know you and be known by you, to help you and support you, and demonstrate his strength in your weakness and failure is extreme. His love is unbalanced. He doesn't wait for you or me to get our act together and then to negotiate a mutually rewarding, 50-50 friendship. No, while we were yet sinners—enemies—he so loved us that he decided to offer up his son to clear every barrier to our relationship, and provide every blessing that we ourselves could never earn.

That's the second element in grace, the unmerited part of the definition. God provided, through Jesus death for us, what we never could have earned. Unconditional forgiveness, complete acceptance, and all the blessings of heaven. And God did it, not because it was the right thing to do, but because he is crazy about you. Jesus' death—Jesus merits—provided all these things for everyone—sinners who get it and decide to trust him, and sinners who don't get it and just go their own way. Grace means that God offers his forgiveness, acceptance, and blessings to everyone BEFORE they make their decision to trust him or not. It's amazing, really! No one will ever end up in Hell because God decided not to forgive, accept, or bless them based on their performance. People end up in Hell because they've decided not to trust the God who has freely offered them unconditional forgiveness, complete acceptance, and the blessings of heaven. They decided to say no to God's grace and to do life their way. So grace begins with a loving God who is crazy about you, just as you are, not as you should be. And it's unmerited. It flows from the cross where Jesus purchased God's pardon for sin. God himself has paid your bill, removed the barriers to a relationship, and offered his heart to you whether you decide to trust him or not. Christianity is not about you doing favors for God; it's all about what God has done for you. And he's done everything necessary to live with you forever as a tenderly loved son or daughter.

And, thirdly God grace—his favor—is expressed in a rainbow of colors. Peter describes God's grace as the “manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10). In other words, God's grace is expressed in many ways: *forgiveness, acceptance, blessing, presence, power, and partnership. All is forgiven, before you ask. You have a reserved place at the family table. If anything good has happened or is happening in your life, it's a gift from your loving Father. When you decided to trust him, Jesus came—in the person of the Holy Spirit—to live within you. He's now begun to live his life through you, empowering you to take the next step and the next and the next. He'll never leave you or forsake you. You'll never wake up on a morning like this and be all on your own. And, as his son or daughter, God has invited you into the family mission: graciously loving others, as God loves you and you love God. It's all included in a life of grace.* Grace means that God has provided, through the cross, all we needed or ever will need; our part is to trust and follow Jesus in child-like simplicity. You're Abba's Child! Knowing the truth can actually set you free.

But, for whatever reason, Grace is hard to understand and even harder to receive. It requires us to humble ourselves in uncomfortable ways. Become like little children? That's tough for a self-made man, or a woman who has locked up the pain in her heart and has decided never to cry another tear. The word grace appears only four times in the Gospels, though John tells us that Jesus' life and teaching was full of grace and truth. I suppose you don't have to talk a lot about grace when Grace Personified is standing right in front of you! The interesting thing is that the word *grace* appears ninety-nine times in Paul's letters. What does that tell us? Even back then, Christians had a hard time getting grace, getting Jesus, understanding and living in grace. Wherever Paul went and whatever churches he wrote too, he found that a lot of Christians tilted toward legalism or law-keeping—*i.e.*, trusting Jesus *and thinking that they had to perform for God's forgiveness, acceptance, and blessing* . . . believing that Jesus died for my sins but fearing that his death on a cross wasn't quite enough to satisfy an angry God. So, in many of his letters, but especially in Galatians, Paul takes on legalists and warns new Christians against any teaching that leads them to believe that law-keeping can add one thing—one merit—to the unmerited favor provided by Jesus' death on a cross.

Today we're wrapping up our 16 part series on Galatians/Amazing Grace. All of the talks are available on our internet website. The Apostle Paul was a first generation Christian who took the message of God's grace to folks in Central Turkey and introduced them to Jesus. After becoming Christians and forming local congregations sometime around A.D. 50, some older, wiser Jewish Christians came into the Galatian churches and began teaching them that trusting and following Jesus wasn't enough; they also needed to keep the OT law if they wanted to be sure of God's love and forgiveness, acceptance and blessing. Paul wrote this letter to the Galatians about five years after the Galatians became Christians. Paul didn't want legalistic agitators muddying up the waters of God's amazing grace. Everyone needs a spiritual mentor, and they had Paul! As Paul wraps up his letter, he takes the pen and ink from his secretary and adds a personal postscript. He wanted to give special emphasis to a couple of final points, so he wrote them with his own hand in big letters, sort of like how you might underline key words or type something out in all caps! **READ 6:11-18.**

As their spiritual mentor, Paul ends his letter by making several big points. **First, legalists don't share God's heart.** Understand that whatever legalists are arguing for or against, trying to make you feel guilty or sub-Christian (circumcision or Sabbath keeping, abstaining from alcohol or eating vegan, rock and roll or the King James translation of the Bible), legalists don't share God's heart. People who add any kind of performance standards to trusting and following Jesus in grace, don't share God's heart. **You'll discover that they don't share God's heart when you realize that their focus is on controlling you, not setting you free to live like one of God's adult sons or daughters.** Jesus *invited* people to trust and follow him; legalists try to *force* or *compel* others to step into line with their personal convictions. There's nothing wrong with personal convictions; everyone has them. But trying to compel others to do what you've chosen to do is legalistic. It doesn't reflect God's heart. Jesus said that godliness would grow slowly in the heart of God's sons and daughters (like fruit) by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit within them. Legalists try to force conformity now rather than allowing time for growth toward maturity. **FRUIT CAN'T BE FORCED.** Eugene Kennedy, in his book *The Choice to be Human* (on Matthew's Gospel) writes, "*The Devil dwells in the urge to control rather than to liberate the human soul*". "*We stand by a dark forest through which fearful religious and political leaders would force us to pass in single file through their exclusive pathways to righteousness. They want to intimidate us, make us afraid and hand over our souls to them once more*". (quoted in *Ragamuffin*, p. 136). When people try to use guilt or shame, the rules of the house, or family reputation to compel you, as an adult son or daughter of God, to follow the line they are following, they're not speaking for your Heavenly Father.

In addition to being controlling in ways that God is not, legalists motives are often selfish, not loving. Paul states that he believes that these "older, wiser Jewish Christians" who are agitating the Galatians are just trying to **protect themselves and promote themselves** (vv. 12-13). On the one hand, they were afraid of the heat they'd take from other religious people who thought Jesus was a joke, who thought the message of the cross was crazy. They were afraid of the heat they'd have to endure from religious friends and family members if these Galatian Christians became Jesus freaks and made messes in the church by misusing or even abusing their freedom. On the other hand, if they could get the Gentile Christians to become Jews by keeping the OT law, they'd be able to put a few notches on their ministry leader belts—like ministry leaders today who brag that they got six people saved or eight people baptized or a dozen people to join the church.

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded by Christians who struggled initially with grace and legalism (wanting to help folks who were in trouble but also wanting to avoid messes and build a reputation for being winners. Brennan Manning tells this story in *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (p. 154-155). So legalists don't share God's heart. **Their method is control and their motives are selfish.** No matter how sincere they are or reasonable their appeal to you might be, remember that they don't share God's heart for grace and freedom.

When you're looking for a spiritual mentor, you want to look for someone who focuses on the cross and the Spirit. Those are Paul's two abiding concerns as he coaches the Galatians (vv. 14-16): the cross and the Spirit. First, the cross (v. 14) once you get the cross and all that Jesus provided for us on the cross (forgiveness, acceptance, blessing, presence, partnership, power), there isn't another story, religion, philosophy, or set of laws or principles that can compare. The world might laugh at the cross, but I can't get over the cross. The cross has set us free from the law and the curse of the law. The cross has set us free to live as God's adult sons and daughters. The cross has introduced us to the promise of the Spirit whose presence within us produces Jesus' character, and whose power flowing through us enables us to love and serve like Jesus. You know that you've got the right spiritual mentor when that man or woman takes you back to the cross when you've failed and are feeling hopeless . . . takes you back to the cross when your emotions are lying to you and whispering that God doesn't love you any more . . . takes you back to the cross when your facing the challenges of loving, serving, and giving to others just as they are, not as they should be.

Secondly, you want to look for a mentor who focuses on the life of the Holy Spirit within you. When Paul says that what counts is the new creation, he's talking about Jesus (or the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus) moving into your life and releasing his presence and power through your life. When a man or woman decides, in child-like faith, to begin trusting and following Jesus, Jesus invades his or her life with his presence and power, changing them from the inside out. Paul himself has experienced this inner transformation and describes it in 2:20, "The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who love me and

gave himself for me”. Paul felt like a new creation, a new man. Slowly but slowly, like fruit budding and blossoming in spring time, Paul discovered that the Spirit of Jesus was changing him from the inside out. That’s an entirely different experience than the man who get us up in the morning, looks inside himself at a garbage dump of regrets and secrets, and decides, by his own determination, to try to do better today by at least keeping the Ten Commandments . . . only to break two of them before lunch!

The life of grace cannot be lived apart from the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, who produces transforming life-giving changes within us, that we could never, by trying harder and harder and harder produce on our own. We don’t step into the life of grace just by turning away from legalism. Many people turn away from the chains of legalism only to fall into abuses of freedom . . . which is just a different dead-end. We step into a life of grace only as we turn from legalism and open our lives to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit . . . as we learn to hear the Spirit’s voice, take risks with the Spirit’s leading, and learn to use the Spirit’s power to love and serve like Jesus.

This isn’t all mystical. You can take practical steps to develop the life of the Spirit within you. Let me give you two practical steps. First, become a student of the Bible, especially the Gospels. Start reading the Bible and reflecting on it. Scratch a little deeper than the Sunday school lessons you remember. Join a group of guys or gals who spend time discussing the Bible and trying to live it together. Thoughtful Bible reading can actually help you to go deeper with the Holy Spirit. Here’s an interesting comparison and contrast. Look at Ephesians 5:18 and Colossians 3:16, side by side. Ephesians and Colossians are two letters Paul wrote that follow a parallel track. In Ephesians 5:18, Paul challenges the Christians in Ephesus to make sure that they are taking personal steps to keep inviting the Holy Spirit to fill their lives more and more (like balloons that contain air but still have more room to expand). But how does a person know if it’s working? They’ll be able to discern that their hearts are being stirred and filled by the Holy Spirit in greater measure because whatever fills our hearts, comes out of our mouths. Ever been around a guy who has just bought a new car, or a gal who has just gone out with a great, new date? They can’t stop talking about the thing or the person or the experience that fills their hearts. And, if you could observe them when they’re alone in their apartment, or car you’d hear them singing and even making up songs about this new experience or lover. It’s the same way when the Holy Spirit fills a person’s inner life. That person won’t be able to stop talking and singing about their deepening experience with God. So Paul writes to the Ephesians that as the Holy Spirit fills them, they’ll know it because the experience will flow out of their mouths in psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. So, what about Christians who are quiet, withdrawn, sullen? They’re probably stuck somewhere between legalism and freedom. They need to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

But, wait, look at Colossians 3:16. Paul says, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another”. To the Christians living in Ephesus, Paul says to open your heart to the Spirit in deeper ways. To the Christians in the ancient city of Colosse, Paul says, I want you to invest in digging deeper into your Bibles. I want you to form Bible studies where you can discuss and teach and apply Scriptural examples and instructions to your daily life. As you do, you’ll be having the kind of spiritual experiences that you can’t stop talking about and even singing about. You’ll discover the Holy Spirit speaking to you through the Bible and you’ll find that as you fill your heart with the truths in Scripture, the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of truth—will be filling you with deeper experiences of his presence and power. From time to time, ordinary Christians do have mystical experiences with the Holy Spirit and filled to overflowing just through asking for prayer. But in the routine of life, ordinary Christians can deepen their experience of the Holy Spirit just by taking time to sit down with their Bible and praying, “Holy Spirit, speak to me about my life right now as I read this ancient book”.

But Paul ends his letter by tipping his hat to the mystical side of life—the life experiences we sometimes describe as the Holy Spirit blowing into the room, uninvited, but life-giving in his presence. Paul ends his letter with a blessing: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit brothers and sisters. Blessings are mystical and, Paul believed in blessings. That you can lay your hand on someone, and say some words, that actually have power to open doors. Blessings aren’t just kind words; they are words that actually open doors to spiritual experiences. Paul didn’t just say this to say something nice; he said these things expecting that God was present and would actually respond and do something—authentically supernatural. In this case, Paul actually expected the Christians to recover quickly from this painful conflict, feel stronger, and clearer, and freer to move ahead, living Jesus life together with greater faith and love.

If you want to develop the life of the Spirit, to make progress in living as a new creation—God’s new man or God’s new woman—you need to get past your cynicism or agnosticism about the supernatural and make room for the Holy Spirit to do things that you may not be able to account for in any other way but that there is a God and he is in the room with you. You need to summon up all your courage to risk becoming a player, to risk asking for prayer, to risk participating in the upcoming *Naturally Supernatural* conference. What happens if you don’t? You stay stuck, caught in some desert between law and grace, lost in some dark forest between bondage and freedom, drifting aimlessly on some ocean between trying to be good and actually living in faith and love. **No one can step into the life of grace without stepping into the life of the Spirit, for they are one and the same.**

So, as we finish this long series on Paul’s letter to the Galatians, and you start thinking, “What next?” I think that Paul might say, look around for a spiritual mentor. Don’t try to make this journey along. Find some friends in a Bible study or a home group. Find a partner, a coach, or a mentor. Be discerning, of course. Listen to him or her for a while; listen for ridged perspectives, controlling attitudes and narrow thinking. That approach to life probably doesn’t represent God’s heart. Listen for counsel that takes you back to the cross and pushes you ahead to new experiences with the Holy Spirit. That man or woman would be a mentor who can help you keep moving forward on the path of God’s amazing grace.