

The Scandal and Sweetness of Free Grace

Mark 2:13-22 ¹³ Then He went out again by the sea; and all the multitude came to Him, and He taught them. ¹⁴ As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him. ¹⁵ Now it happened, as He was dining in Levi's house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him. ¹⁶ And when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, "How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹⁷ When Jesus heard it, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

When Elizabeth I was queen of England, she had many enemies. One day, a female assassin disguised herself as a male page, and managed to infiltrate the palace, and hid in the queen's private dressing room, waiting for the moment to stab the queen to death. What the assassin did not know was that the queen's attendants would search her room every night before they would allow her to go to sleep. They discovered her, pulled the knife from her grasp and brought her in before the queen. She knew her case was hopeless, and she threw herself down at the queen's feet, begging the queen for grace. Elizabeth looked at her coldly, and said, "If I give you grace, what promise will you make for the future?" The assassin looked up and said, "Your majesty, grace that has conditions, grace that is chained by precautions, is not grace at all." Elizabeth understood immediately. She said to the assassin, "You are right. I pardon you by my grace." And they let her go, a free woman.

At least at that moment, Elizabeth understood what grace really is. All of the world's religions stand apart from biblical Christianity in this respect: they do not have the concept of free grace. In all religions except Christianity, God may be somewhat gracious, and you receive things you don't deserve, but you must still earn it. You have to deserve it. You must become something that God will then accept or save or bless or favour.

Grace distinguishes true religion from the false. If you misunderstand grace, you misunderstand the whole message of the Bible. You misunderstand the gospel.

Grace is not just a religious word we play with. How you understand grace, and what you do with grace will decide whether you spend eternity with God in heaven, or with everyone else who has refused grace, in hell. Everyone wants to go heaven. No one gets to heaven apart from grace.

Our account of Jesus calling Matthew is a lesson about free grace. Jesus was the embodiment of free grace. The law came through Moses, "but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:17) As Jesus acts a certain way towards this tax collector, we'll learn three lessons about free grace.

I. Free Grace Can Save Anyone

³ Then He went out again by the sea; and all the multitude came to Him, and He taught them. ¹⁴ As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him. ¹⁵ Now it happened, as He was dining in Levi's house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him.

Jesus is in Capernaum, the home town of Peter, Andrew, James and John. This is where He called them to follow Him, it is where He healed the whole city at the door of Peter's house, and it is where He forgave the sins and healed the body of a paralytic man lowered down from the ceiling.

Jesus goes out again to the Sea of Galilee, a very large lake right on the doorstep of Capernaum. Jesus would use some of these natural surroundings to speak to a whole crowd, and that's what He does here.

The Sea of Galilee would have provided the fishing town of Capernaum with much of its income. So where there's money, there are taxmen. And so probably right here on the shore, was a tax office. When you hear *tax office*, don't think one of the SARS buildings, think *toll booth*. These tax men would set up their booths at very strategic places. The lake of Galilee was a great place for tax men, because you could tax anything imported or exported that was being transported on the lake. You could impose road tolls, because a road that connected some major trade routes ran right past here. You could tax the fish caught; the boats travelling on the Lake; you could tax boats for crossing the lake. Tax collectors worked on a kind of commission basis – they collected a minimum amount which they gave to the rulers, either the Jewish kinds like Herod, or straight to Rome. So they made sure they got Rome or Herod's tax out of you, and then made sure they had a lavish income on top of that. You became a tax collector to get rich.

Tax collectors of this time placed a tax on so many things that scholars have not been able identify the names of the things taxed. In short, these were not simply officials who followed a legal system. They were extortioners, people who exploited and squeezed money out of people wherever they could, with the authority of Rome behind them. They were legalised pirates, who were allowed to stop you on your journey; force you to unload all your animals; open every bale and package, as they rummaged through the belongings; opened your private letters, and insolently looked for what they could tax you for.

How would a tax collector have been viewed by the Jews? Well, the rabbinic writings of the time distinguish two classes of 'publicans:' the tax-gatherer in general (Gabbai), and the Mokhes, or Mokhsa, who did the sort of things I've just described. Levi, sitting here at the Lake of Galilee, was a Mokhes – the most hated kind of tax collector who was like a legalised thief. The Talmud even allowed you to deceive these men, so hated were they.

A tax collector was not only evil for seeking to exploit and steal, but he had willingly become an agent of the hated Roman empire. For the Jews, paying taxes to Rome at all was a thorny question – because if they sent taxes to Rome, they were saying that Caesar was their king, whereas to be Jewish was to have Jehovah alone as king.

Try to imagine how one Jewish man would have viewed another Jewish man who had chosen to become a tax collector. Here is an open law-breaker, a man who steals and oppresses and exploits every day without a twang of conscience; who has betrayed his nation and sided with the pagans. He is a parasite, a leech, who sucks out the hard-earned money of his own countrymen for his own benefit and the enrichment of the enemy.

For the rabbis, and for Jews in general, tax collectors were the bottom of the barrel. You didn't get worse than the man whose career choice was to be a tax collector. This was a man who was permanently unclean. Whatever moral disgust you reserve for paedophiles, rapists, serial killers, genocidal torturers, this is how a tax collector was seen.

By the way, when you are hated by the population, avoided by the rabbis, and generally avoided by all, what kind of people become your friends? Who become your associates, your compatriots, the people you have over for meals? Fellow tax collectors. Other societal dropouts, and people rejected by the mainstream.

Sitting here, on the side or shore of the lake where Jesus was teaching was the tax collector Levi, son of Alphaeus. When the Gospel of Matthew records this same event, it gives his name as

Matthew. Evidently, like many Jews, Matthew had more than one name.

We wonder how many times Matthew had been in his booth, hearing Jesus teach, pretending not to listen, but increasingly drawn to the gracious words of this new, young rabbi Jesus, intrigued, wishing he could just go and sit with the crowd and listen to this teaching which seemed so old and true, and yet so new and life-giving. He had no doubt seen the miracles that this man had done in Capernaum. He probably believed in his head that He was the Messiah. Maybe several times as he listened to Jesus' messages on God's grace to sinners, he felt a great lump in his throat, and felt remorse beginning to melt his hard heart, which he suppressed. He told himself it was too late for him. He had crossed too many lines, burned too many bridges, ruined his life with too much sin. For him the way ahead was not back, but forward, more sin.

And on that one day, when Jesus finished teaching, He came right up to the booth, looked eyes with Matthew and called him to a new life. "Follow Me." As simple as that, but Matthew knew what it meant. He knew Jesus was offering Him full forgiveness for his life of deliberate wickedness and enlistment as a pupil, a disciple, a follower of Himself – this pure, righteous, perfect rabbi. He knew Jesus was calling Him to abandon his life of sin, and become an apprentice of the Messiah.

What do you think went on in Matthew's heart that moment? How did he feel, knowing that Messiah knew exactly what he was; Messiah knew what he did for a living; Messiah knew all about him, and was ready to accept him. That Messiah *loved him, even as a wretched tax-collector*. Fellow-sinners wouldn't have him in their homes, and here was the Messiah inviting him to be his friend. We can only think of the words of hymns that possibly expressed Matthew's amazement, staggered gratitude, tearful repentance. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me", or "Come Ye Sinners weak and wounded, sick and sore, lost and ruined by the fall – if you tarry till you're better, you will never come at all". Or maybe: "Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made, were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade, to write the love of God above, would drain the ocean dry. Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Though stretched from sky to sky."

When the grace of Jesus comes to a sinner, it does not lay down a list of conditions: you can follow Me, Matthew, so long as you keep the following rules. When the grace of Jesus comes, it does not put down a period of probation: seeing how wicked you have been. Matthew, we'll just watch to see if you can keep this grace. Grace with precautions, grace with conditions, grace with probations, is not grace at all. Free grace comes to the worst of sinners and says, I know what you've done. I've made a payment big enough to cancel your debt. Now come - as you are, come. To come, you do not want to remain as you are, that's obvious. Free grace calls all sinners to come. Free grace can save anyone.

Anyone? Even the depraved gang that would party with Matthew?

¹⁵ *Now it happened, as He was dining in Levi's house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him.*

Since Matthew's friends had been the same kind of people, he held a banquet and invited them, and they too were embraced by free grace. They too, celebrated a new life, a second chance. They had nothing to commend them to Jesus, but Jesus had come to them – free grace.

Do you understand why grace must be free to still be grace? Because the moment you mix in any works, the moment there is something you can give to God to earn His forgiveness, to make Him love you more, to attract Him to you, it is no longer grace, it is a transaction. It is a legal contract. If

that's the way you want it, then what is it that we can use to trade with God? What can sinners bring to impress God? Sinners are bankrupt. We have nothing to trade with, nothing to offer God, nothing to get Him to favour us more. Our good works in God's sight are rusty and rotten and decaying, filled with the stench of selfishness and pride. Religion thinks that we can build ourselves a tower of our own good works that will reach into heaven. But the Biblical faith says, never. Our good works' towers are sand castles.

On one occasion, Jesus was teaching a cold-hearted Pharisee what free grace is, and he told the story of two people who owed a man different sums of money, one bigger, and one smaller. And then Jesus said this:

Luke 7:42 ⁴² *"And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both.*

They had nothing with which to repay. That's us.

By keeping it free, God's grace can save anyone. By removing merit altogether, anyone can be saved. We're all bankrupt. It doesn't matter if your bankruptcy was bigger than the next man's. It amounts to the same thing. God's grace still calls self-confessed sinners to follow and fellowship. He calls paedophiles. He calls rapists. He calls murderers. He calls the Matthews of this world to Himself. He calls you.

And if free grace can save anyone, it means it comes for them as they are.

The Bible keeps shouting at the top of its voice, grace comes to us not when we are reforming but when we were deforming, not when we were rising, but when we were sinking, not when we were earning, but when we were going deeper into debt, not when we were becoming more attractive, but when we were storing up greater wrath.

Romans 5:8 ⁸ *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Ephesians 2:3-5 *and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),*

No wonder Matthew and his friends were celebrating. Grace is so free that even those with the biggest debts to God can be forgiven. Even those worst of sinners can come to Jesus, where they are and as they are.

But sadly, not everyone is overjoyed by grace. Our passage teaches that some are rather annoyed by it.

II. Free Grace is a Stumbling-Block to Some

¹⁶ *And when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, "How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?"*

The scribes and Pharisees were not happy to see these sinners rejoicing with Jesus. They looked at this celebration as a big endorsement of sin. By eating with these men, Jesus was approving of their lifestyles, and giving them even more license to sin - so they thought. They were unclean, and Jesus was associating with them.

You can hear them saying to each other, “This man is not serious about holiness! Look, He's willing to befriend the filthy!” For these men, free grace was a stumblingblock. It was a scandal.

How could these sinners be embraced by Jesus so easily? How could it be so simple as merely leaving their life and coming to Christ? No! If it is that free, sinners will get the wrong idea! People will think sin is a light thing! Sin will be encouraged, and God's holiness will be trivialised. We've worked very hard for our righteousness, thank you very much. We need to set up some obstacles, some hurdles for people like this. We need to keep our distance so they know they are unacceptable. Then, if they start showing signs of repentance, and start reforming, perhaps then we can re-evaluate.

That's pure proud flesh talking. Sometimes, we think just like the Pharisees. We reveal that we also trip over free grace. We think because God hates sin, that He will only help those who have met him half-way. But that's not free-grace. We think that if you cannot earn God's forgiveness, then you will take it lightly. But that's not free-grace. We think that if we cannot earn God's acceptance by our works, or sustain it by our works, then we will feel like we have permission to sin all the more. What we don't understand is that free grace is not cheap grace. It is free in that we cannot earn it. But it came at the highest price ever – the life and blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is a priceless gift - but it is a gift.

And when we understand it, free grace is not freedom to sin, it is freedom from sin. It is freedom from the accusing conscience that, under the law, kept rebelling and diving ever deeper into sin. Grace comes to us and tells us we are forgiven and cleansed and made righteous for His name's sake, by His mercy, and there is nothing we could do to earn it, contribute to it, or sustain it. With that burden lifted, our new hearts respond out of desire -we want to please Him! We don't want the old, we want the new!

Was Jesus more tolerant of sin than the Pharisees? It was the other way around. Read the Sermon on the Mount. He kept saying, “You have heard it said..., but I say unto you...” In other words, what the Pharisees have taught you is not holy enough! The Pharisees were too tolerant of sin, and Jesus raised the bar. Jesus was not more tolerant or soft on sin.

But Jesus, being the embodiment of free grace, called and welcomed broken hearted sinners. He didn't expect sinners to reform on their own. He gave a free and open invitation to all to come. And when the Pharisees criticised Him, He would tell parables to show what God's heart is like for all men, compared to their hearts. He spoke of an anxious shepherd who loses one of his hundred sheep, and goes looking for, and finds it, and organises a celebration with his friends when he gets back! That's God's heart to the repenting sinner. He spoke of a woman with ten silver coins, who loses one, and turns the house upside down until she finds it, and then organises a celebration with friends and neighbours because she finds it. That's God's heart to the returning sinner. He spoke of a wild youth who spent his savings on partying until he was totally broke, without friends, and living an utterly degraded existence. So he went back to his father, ready to be nothing more than a servant, and his father met him running, re-clothed him, and held a feast. That's God's heart to the worst of sinners who wants forgiveness.

Those who are scandalised by free grace are like the older brother in that story. He was sulking, pouting, when his prodigal brother returned. He thought his brother should be chastised or rejected. Or at the very least, father should have honoured him more for not leaving the house. This is the coldness of self-righteousness.

It was the coldness of Simon the Pharisee when a woman came into the house where Jesus was eating with Simon, and washed his feet with her tears. And Simon was disgusted. But Jesus said, her sin has been freely forgiven, and so she loves much in return. She's been a recipient of free grace, and she's overwhelmed. Why aren't you, Simon, if you've also received free grace? People who are scandalised by the freeness of grace do not rejoice in it. They want merit systems, point systems, accounting systems of debit and credit – not knowing that they are bankrupt.

So what happens if you extend this free grace, like Jesus did, to everyone? What if you invite drunkards, homosexuals, paedophiles, pornographers, adulterers, murderers, rapists, and so on to Christ? What if you tell them to come to Him, as they are, for a new life? Do you endorse their sin? Do you encourage them to keep sinning?

There are two ditches on opposite sides of the road of free grace. The ditch on this side is isolation, where we avoid sinners, and stick to Christian ghettos, and like the Pharisees, set ourselves up like a monastery on a mountain, and tell sinners to start climbing the road of good works to show they are sincere. The opposite ditch is imitation, where we tell sinners that we are just like them, and we turn the church into a bar or a nightclub, and try to fit in with all the evil of the world just to make Jesus seem trendy and accessible. And instead of making Jesus seem attractive, we make Him seem no different and irrelevant, and instead we end up conformed to the world.

But the road of free grace is not imitation, nor is it isolation, it is invitation. It invites sinners to come as they are. Not to stay as they are. Nor to change first and then come. But to come to Jesus as they are for a new life. Jesus' love and invitation extends to drunkards. But they will not enter the kingdom as drunkards. Jesus' extended hand is to homosexuals, the immoral, pornographers, adulterers. But they will not enter the kingdom as homosexuals, fornicators, pornographers or adulterers. He came to seek and to save, those that are lost. The unconditional invitation to follow Christ to others:

¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

But you will only understand that beautiful middle path of what grace is, when you understand your own need of it. That's why Jesus said what He said in reply to these Pharisees. Free grace can save anyone, even though free grace is a stumbling block to some,

III. Free Grace is Sweet to Those Who Need It

⁷ When Jesus heard it, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Jesus responds to their disapproval of His free grace towards sinners by giving a simple proverb: healthy people don't need a doctor, the sick do. These people are like sick people, racked by the disease of sin, and I came to cure them. Just like a doctor doesn't come to heal the healthy, so I didn't come to forgive the forgiven, but to forgive those who need it.

Matthew and his friends were sinners, and they knew it. When Jesus brought them free grace, they knew they were ill and He was the doctor and the cure. For them, His free grace was sweet, because they knew they needed it.

Question: were the Pharisees spiritually healthy people, who had no need of Jesus' grace? Were they the righteous that Jesus did not come to call?

They were righteous in their own eyes. They felt that they had achieved their own righteousness. They didn't need God's charity, thank you very much! When they went up to the Temple to pray, if there was a tax-collector nearby, they would say:

" 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men -- extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹² 'I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' "

Because they were so self-righteous, they felt no need for God's righteousness. And so, Jesus' call was not for them. Sinners can and must come to Jesus, the self-righteous can stay away.

Grace is only understood when we realise the condition of all sinners. When we understand our debt, when we understand our bankruptcy. That's when we are like the tax collector who was praying near the Temple:

standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

That's when we are like the returning Prodigal Son, saying: **Luke 15:18-19** *"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, ¹⁹ "and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants." "*

Do you remember evil king Saul, how he hunted David down and tried to kill him? Years later, Saul was killed in battle, and David was crowned king. New kings would often hunt down the remaining descendants of a previous king, if that king had been unfriendly to him. David finds a relative of Saul's: a crippled man named Mephibosheth. He is lame, he cannot defend himself, he cannot run away from David. He is expecting to have his head cut off in David's throne room. David brings him in, and says, "For the sake of my friend Jonathan, you will eat at my table, for the rest of your life."

Free grace. What is the response to free grace?

And Mephibosheth said: **"2 Samuel 9:8** ⁸ *Then he bowed himself, and said, "What is your servant, that you should look upon such a dead dog as I?"*

We come to God, empty-handed, and broken-hearted. We come to God desperate and humbled. That's when free grace is sweet. Those who think of themselves as fairly good, a more-or-less moral person, don't feel the sweetness of grace. This is the reason why sitting here this morning in this building as members of NCBC and worshippers of God, are men who have spent time in prison, while ostensibly law-abiding citizens are out there right now playing golf.

Those who see themselves as righteous, become blind and insensitive to their own need, and soon to the needs of others. For them grace is not amazing, it's insulting. Jesus said to the Pharisees

Luke 16:15 *And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts.*

If you want to defend yourself against the charge that you are a sinner, then you will not have God to defend you, only to judge you. If you want to class yourself as righteous, then God will not do that. If you come to God with your hands full of your own works, there is no space for His gift.

Free grace means God can save anyone who realises they need saving. Paul Washer was a missionary to Peru for many years, and he tells the story of a very poor mother who lived in Brazil.

She had one very beautiful daughter in their poor home, with mud floor. Her greatest fear was that her daughter would leave home and go to Rio de Janeiro. One day, her worst fear was realised. She came home and found a note, "Gone to Rio to find a new life." The mother gathered up all her money, left home and went to Rio. The first thing she did was to spend a great deal of money at a photo booth making hundreds of copies of a photo of herself. She then spent months going from nightclub to nightclub, hotel to hotel, restaurant to restaurant, to the places of great wickedness searching for her daughter. But after months of doing this, she used up all her money and had to go home. One night, that daughter was walking down the stairs of a hotel with a man. She had become a prostitute. She saw herself in the mirror and she saw again that she had aged fifteen years. As they descended the stairs, her eyes caught a small photo stuck on the mirror. She couldn't believe her eyes – it was a picture of her mother. She took it off the mirror, and on the back was written, "I don't care what you've done. I don't care what you've become. Please come home."

And I say to you that throughout Scripture, the holy God, who hates sin and will judge it in fiery hell forever says to every sinner: "I don't care what you have done. I don't care what you have become. My Son has paid for it all on the cross. Now come home."

That's free grace. If you will come to Him today, empty-handed, ready to receive only, and allow God to declare you righteous, you will taste the sweetness of it.