

The Trouble with Grace, part 1: Jesus

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Whenever I talk about grace, it seems, someone is sure to get rattled by the idea. Some people think that grace means lawlessness--a world of anarchy in which there is no justice and evil runs rampant.

In a world as messed up as this one, chaos is a real and legitimate concern. If that is the issue, then concern about grace is really asking this question:

Does grace make this world a better place or a worse one?

This is part of a thought process about that question.

What do we mean by grace? It is a huge reality with multiple ramifications, but I'll start with a simple definition that reflects my understanding of the Bible: Grace is the Creator's power and love providing better than fallen people deserve.

And what is a fallen person? We all are. I appreciate the Bible's honesty in *not pretending that there is a class of people fundamentally superior to others*. What is wrong with this messed up world? For starters, we are. None of us have mastered the ability to live without contributing to the problem. We are all part of the problem. None of us wants to hear that, but you can't accept grace if you deny your need for it.

So why doesn't the Creator do something about our fallen-ness? That's what the Bible is about. The Creator became a man and showed us what it could look like if we were doing this well. That's what the Bible claims Jesus to be: the Creator in our shoes.

What was He like, the Creator in the flesh? For a surprising start, He wasn't overbearing and demeaning. We expect a flawless person to be insufferable. Jesus wasn't. He didn't marginalize the powerless: children, women, the disabled, the poor, the sick, the demon-possessed, foreigners, prostitutes. He gave them love, honor, new life. Nor did he avoid criminals, or the rich, or the religiously or politically powerful. He simply did not treat any of them as if they deserved to be treated according to a social scale.

Not surprisingly, the downcast found this to be uplifting, while the powerful, as a rule, considered this a threat. But even many of the lowly turned against Jesus when it became evident that He was not going to simply destroy their perceived enemies and make them the new lords. Their hope was to knock the bullies off the hill and become the new bullies. They wanted the same social scale, but with themselves on the other end. What they weren't ready for was grace.

It turns out that nobody was free of the craving to be above others. The conflict was vividly played out on that Passover weekend when Jesus was arrested--though he refused to resist. He was sentenced to death, though no one could prove him guilty of anything. He was horrifically beaten, though he had harmed no one. And he was killed in a way intended to magnify the power of the ruling authority while inflicting as much public shame and suffering as possible. That illustrates how anti-grace our world can be--and how out-of-sync with our Creator we can be.

But what was intended to display crushing defeat didn't work on Jesus. By the third day He was alive again, demonstrating how un-defeated He was. Just as surprisingly, He didn't come out of the tomb with payback for all those who opposed Him, abandoned Him, lied about Him, abused Him, and killed Him.

Instead, He sought out those who had deserted Him. Naturally, they were afraid, but His first words were to reassure them He didn't come to frighten them. This was good news, and He told them to pass it on--not only to one nation, but to all of them.

That was not the way anyone had thought. It wasn't what any of them had expected. It wasn't a structure Jesus had told them to construct. This wasn't "good news" from the point of view of anyone who thought themselves a superior model of humanity, worthy to thrive while others accepted their inferiority.

Did it run counter to the worldwide current of winning by dominance over your opponent? Thoroughly. So could you reasonably say that it encourages lawlessness and anarchy? That has been the argument of many a tyrant. It is what the religious court told Caesar's military governor. "He is going to launch a rebellion." Who thought that Jesus was going to ignite chaos? The authorities did. But they were the ones making a mockery of justice. Jesus was the only peaceful person there.

Both before and after his death Jesus embodied grace, and it didn't lead to chaos. Grace is a spiritual power that overcame fear and death itself, restored hope to the despairing, transformed selfish hotheads into humble messengers, moved racists across ethnic barriers, turned terrorists into servant missionaries, and scattered the persecuted like seeds to plant good news around the world.

Do counterfeits exist? Without question. Is religion often a facade for heavy-handed authoritarianism? Of course it is. Is it grace that ignites chaos? For starters, your answer depends on how you view Jesus.

Would I rather reflect the image of Jesus, or reflect the image of the people who killed Him? I think they were well-intentioned leaders under enormous pressure in a culture with a recent history of widespread bloodshed. Grace looked dangerous. Under the circumstances, they did what reasonable leaders have done throughout history. And I have no desire to be like them.