

The trouble with grace, part 2: relationships

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Put your back into it!
You just have to push through it!
Hit it again! Harder!
Say it louder!
You'll do as I say or else!
God helps those who help themselves.

When we say things like that we are expressing the need for force. Applying the muscle is the best way to get some things done. ("Sure, power corrupts," Jack Handey says, "but it also provides for our electrical needs.") Sometimes directly attacking a problem is most effective.

But not always, and especially not when the goal is to build loving relationships. When we take forcefulness as a general philosophy for all of life we are dooming ourselves to a lot of wounded relations.

The trouble with grace, as some see it, is that it is too patient, too relational. It is fine for dinner parties, but in the daily grind and the workaday world it won't get the job done.

I have seen a lot of marriage break-ups begin with that argument. One spouse was pleading for understanding, and the other was determined to win by force of will. Forcefulness, it appears, was the main problem.

In the Bible, marriage is a major picture of the relationship between God and his people. He could force them to do what He requires, but his primary approach is to reason with people and to demonstrate his patience and love. It is evident that forcing people to obey is not his highest priority, that far more important to Him is that we know Him, love Him, and do life with Him in trust and faithfulness.

(I can just hear the control crowd talking to God: "If you were serious the New Heaven and the New Earth would be finished by now. Why do you allow 'those people' to hold up the process for everybody? You need to man up and set them straight. Do you really want to be in charge? We need a leader who will get on with it. Never mind, we'll do it ourselves. You can join us when you show you're ready. We'll be the judge of that.")

Jesus spends a lot more time talking about relationships than about tasks. He said the whole of Old Testament instruction could be summarized that way: Love the Lord, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40).

And that seems to be the thrust of 1 Corinthians 13. Without love I am nothing but a noisemaker. Love is more powerful than certainty, more powerful than knowledge, greater than faith and hope.

What does this have to do with grace? The Bible says this kind of love initiates good for people before they deserve it. It is the kind of love that God showed by dying for us when we were still rebelling against Him (Romans 5:8).

Jesus said anyone can love the people who love them. But when we love those who don't have it coming we are like our Father in Heaven who sends good things to good people and the evil people alike (Matthew 5:43-48).

That is what grace is: God's goodness to us before we deserve it, even as we are fighting Him.

Here are some of the things the Bible says grace has the power to do:

Grace works powerfully to enable people to spread the good news (Acts 4:33).

Grace builds up people and gives them an inheritance (Acts 20:32).

Grace justifies those who have fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23-24).

Grace frees them from bondage to sin (Romans 6:14).

Grace is more reliable than worldly wisdom (2 Corinthians 1:12).

Grace produces joy and generosity even under severe trials (2 Corinthians 8:1-2).

Grace is sufficient to work powerfully in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Grace takes people dead in sin and raises them with Christ (Ephesians 2:5-6).

Grace gives eternal encouragement and hope (2 Thessalonians 2:16).

Grace offers salvation to all people (Titus 2:11).

Grace can help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

So is grace really ineffective? How has that "force" thing been working in our world for, oh, all of human history? Does authoritarianism have a better track record than grace? To paraphrase G.K. Chesterton, grace hasn't been tried and found lacking. It has been found difficult and left untried.

Of course, on our own, grace isn't only difficult; it's impossible. We can't do grace, or anything else, with consistent effectiveness. Except death. Studies have shown that 100 out of 100 people die. That's one reason Jesus is worth a second look.