

Of Grace and Mercy

By David Morsey

In a world shattered by the ravages of sin, the only real hope for besieged mortals, is the grace and mercy of God.

And, in the church—the very family of God, yet scarred and maimed by the lingering effects of sin—the same grace is essential to survival. However grand the claims of those who have specialized in “spirituality,” the natural self is constantly in conflict with the spirit. The inadequacies and inanities of the flesh, will be with us as long as we are on the earth. We will always be dependent on the grace of God to sustain our spirits, while we are wrestling with the problems of the flesh. Thanks to the grace of God, we have the latitude to handle the problems of the flesh in the context of His acceptance and caring love.

In an obvious attempt to gain leverage, the church has often focused so much on the “angry” side of God, that very few think of Him in terms of “compassion.” The constant “pressure to perform,” on the part of the leaders, leaves one with the impression that God is never satisfied, and that He really doesn’t like His people all that well, especially the less “spiritual” ones (a category readily accepted by the honest). It would seem that, having been drawn into the kingdom of God by the offer of grace, one must now run the gauntlet of goodness to retain His favor.

God’s disenchantment with His creatures is a very prevalent theme in the preachments of Christendom, rising in a great crescendo in the prophetic pronouncements of the “doomsayers.” The theme of God’s grace is drowned out by the cacophony of criticism leveled at His creatures. And, the lingering legacy of guilt and discouragement stifles the joyfulness of faith in the overwhelming sense of God’s general displeasure.

There is much we do not understand about God’s dealings with humanity, but one thing is certain—the grace of God far outweighs the judgment. While we cannot ignore the message of judgment, it is much better for us, caught in the same wretched predicament as all creatures of earth, to focus on the grace of God, and leave the complex matter of judgment to Him. The danger is, that the issue of judgment, carelessly handled, appears to leave one with the sterile option of either enforced allegiance to God, or eternal torment with Satan. On this basis, it is fair to ask whether, or not, given a choice without fear of retribution, one would, in fact, elect to follow such an “angry” God.

But, such a concept of God is completely contrary to His Word, which abounds in revelations of His grace and mercy. We have a right to expect that the grace, love, and longsuffering which God urges upon His people, would be fully exemplified in Himself. And so the Bible teaches.

The words, “grace” and “mercy,” and their derivatives, occur hundreds of times in the Bible, to say nothing of great numbers of companion concepts. But what do these words really mean, and what is the difference between them? We first encounter the pervasive and consoling pair, of all places, in the giving of the law.

God’s law had come with grace and mercy. In ages past, on Mt Sinai, as Moses presented the stones on which God would inscribe His changeless will, God responded with a great hymn of mercy. *“And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth. Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgressions, and sin...’”* (Exodus 34:5-7). Even in the age of law, prior to the coming of Jesus, mercy and grace are constantly recurring themes.

In the Hebrew text, (the language of the Old Testament), the predominant word for “mercy,” is **chased**. It means “mercy,” in the sense of “kindness.” It has to do with the deeds that are the outward expression of the inner attitude of compassion. In the King James version of the Bible, the word, **chased**, is also translated by “pity,” “lovingkindness,” “favor,” and “goodness.” The word, with these variations, occurs over four hundred times in the Old Testament.

The companion word to “mercy,” is “grace.” These two words occur together continually. The Hebrew word is **chanan**, and refers more to the inner attitude of benevolence, or compassion, than the deeds of compassion which are the outward expression.

In the New Testament (written in Greek) the usual word for “mercy” is **eleos**, which has to do with alms, and charities. The word for “grace,” is **charis**, which signifies “abundant giving.” It is the root of the words for “giving,” thanksgiving, and “forgiving.” The word, “grace,” as it is used both in Old and New Testaments, really signifies “the free flow of God’s benevolence, or compassion.” The common definition—“The unmerited favor of God”—misses the true flavor of the word. To define it thus, is like giving someone a gift, and then making sure they understand how little they deserve it. It is understood, of course, that a gift is a gift, and not based on anything the recipient has done to earn it. It is not in keeping with the spirit of giving, however, to emphasize that point. Jesus never made an issue of this, with the people to whom He ministered. In all the miracles which Jesus performed, we do not find any reference to the unworthiness of the recipient of His grace.

It is unfortunate that so many needless barriers are raised between the believer and Christ. It is assumed, and often taught, that if we make mistakes, or act in a fleshly manner, we are out of favor with Christ, and that He won’t hear us. As well would a parent refuse to hear an erring child. The fact that the child wants to come, in spite of the problem, gladdens the parent’s heart. It is true, of course, that living in a pattern of disobedience,

that is known, and unrepented of, will dull the ears to Christ, but typical, human, fleshly weakness is a different matter. How else is one to receive help, unless one can depend on continual access to Christ, inspite of human failures.

The evidence that Christ is with us, is that we want Him to be. However badly the day has gone, we come to the end of it, and we want to talk to Christ. That is the proof of His presence. He will not turn a deaf ear to a seeking child. That is the essence of grace.