

“GRACE: CONNECT THE DOTS (#5): BALANCED GRACE”

(James 2:14-17)

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[PROP NEEDED: “*Broken Down*” SermonSpice Video Clip]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 3-29-09]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read NRSV Text: James 2:14-17 and Pray.
2. Today we’re concluding our sermon series in which we’ve been exploring the meaning and purpose of the grace of God.

A–Now, we’ve learned about the three forms/manifestations that grace takes – Preventing, Justifying, and Sanctifying – and how each of these function to help overcome the gap / brokenness caused by sin in our lives.

B–And we’ve also learned (last week) that God doesn’t just call us to a renewed relationship with Him without *also* giving us various tools (or “means of grace”) to help us grow in that relationship – ...

C—...Things like prayer, reading the Bible, Christian worship, fellowship, accountability, Holy Communion, and a whole host of others.
3. And yet, it’s important for us to understand that while our practice of these means are important because they help us grow in our *personal* walk with God, if they’re ALL that we do, then we end up with a faith that looks suspiciously like this...

A–...[WATCH “*Broken Down*” VIDEO CLIP (From SermonSpice.com –Time: 3:30)]

B–You see, if the only practices of our faith focus on helping us grow in our relationship with *God our heavenly Father*, then we end up with an unbalanced Christianity. ¹

–II–

4. So what I want us to talk about today is importance of “**Balanced Grace**” in our lives of faith – how we balance actions of *personal* grace / holiness (that help connect us to *God*) with those of *social* grace/holiness (that help connect us to our *fellow humanity*). ²

A–Today’s scripture from James 2:14-17 describes this balance in this way:
(MSG) “*Dear friends, do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say ‘Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!’ and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup – where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?”*
(NRSV) “*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*” ³

1–Now don't hear James wrong – this is *not* what's called “works righteousness,” where we can be “saved” by our good works.

2–Instead, he's merely pointing out that if our *personal* holiness is genuine, then it will naturally create a passion and desire for *social* holiness – that if we truly have Jesus in our *hearts*, then we'll want to serve our fellow humans with our *hands*.

B–And in fact, we find this very idea throughout the Bible. ⁴

1–For example, the Old Testament is full of passages that express concern for the plight of the needy and oppressed, ⁵ and the prophets even teach that we can't even know God properly if we don't seek justice for the poor. ⁶

2–Micah 6:8 asks “*What does the Lord require of [us] but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God?*”

3–And this is echoed in 1 John 4:20 in the New Testament where it says “*Those who say, 'I love God,' & hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.*” ⁷

4–You may remember that in the “Parable of the Sheep and the Goats” (Matthew 25), Jesus himself quite bluntly says that neglect of the poor has dire consequences: (MSG) “*Then [the Lord] will turn to the 'goats,' the ones on his left, and say, 'Get out, worthless goats! You're good for nothing but the fires of hell. And why? Because... I was hungry and you gave me no meal, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was homeless and you gave me no bed, I was shivering and you gave me no clothes, sick and in prison, and you never visited.'* Then those ‘goats’ are going to say ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn't help?’ He will answer them, ‘I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me – you failed to do it to me’” (Verses 41-45).

(NRSV) “*[The Lord] will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'* Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me’” (Verses 41-45).

5–And in fact, the first four verses of that parable (Verses 37-40) say that the *opposite* of this is also true: our *care & compassion* FOR the poor makes us *fit* for heaven. ⁸

C–In other words, biblically, God's grace is not only meant to be *received by us*; it's also meant to be *shared with others*.

5. It may help us to visualize “Balanced Grace” as the two beams of a cross:

A–The vertical beam represents our actions of *personal* holiness – things we do that help us grow in our personal relationship and walk with God (like prayer, Bible reading, worship and Holy Communion, and other “means of grace”).

B–The horizontal beam represents our actions of *social* holiness – things we do that help us reflect the compassion of God through our actions with/towards our fellow humanity (things like serving the poor, standing up for the oppressed, and challenging prejudice and injustice in all their subtle forms).

C–And just as it takes *both* beams to make a cross, so it takes *both* dimensions of faith practice (the “personal” *and* the “social”) to have a balanced Christian life.

6. Methodist evangelist Alan Walker once said that... “*There is no greater menace in the church than a born-again Christian without a social conscience.*”⁹

A–And that’s why I think its so important for us here at East Cobb U.M.C. not only to talk about and stress the importance of each of us having a relationship with God through a personal commitment to Jesus as our Lord and Savior,...

B–...but *also* the importance of those of us who’ve made such a commitment to be practicing our faith in how we demonstrate God’s compassion and care for our fellow human beings.

C–In your sermon notes, you’ll find directions to how both you and your small group can be involved in such actions of “social holiness” through our church’s mission ministries.

–III–

7. The bottom line is that *personal* grace and *social* grace go hand in hand for a person of Christian faith – they’re two sides to the same coin.¹⁰

A–In the 14th-century, Teresa of Avila expressed it this way:

*“Christ has no hands but our hands,
Christ has no feet but our feet,
Christ has no love but our love,
To tell of his goodness, to heal the world's wounds, & to teach the way of love.”*¹¹

B–Friends, you and I are the hands and feet and love of Jesus in today’s world.

1–We can (and should) seek to grow closer to God through our actions and activities of personal faith.

2--But we must *also demonstrate* that faith by how we *treat* and *serve* others.¹²

C–...Because practiced together, these two give us “*Balanced Grace*” in our lives of faith.

8. [PRAYER and commitment to be engaged in BOTH personal and social holiness]

ENDNOTES:

1. Much of the preaching, teaching, and evangelism in many of our churches today (especially here in the American “Bible-belt” South) tends to center around this first (personal) dimension of Christian faith. Hence, we tend to place great emphasis upon personal conversion, and of each and every individual having their own personal walk with God through Jesus Christ. This is good,...*except* when this *first* dimension becomes the ONLY dimension of salvation or grace that we ever hear about or practice!
2. The early Methodists called the former “*Acts of Piety*,” not because the doing of them earns us salvation or makes us self-righteous or better than anyone else, but because they are actions and faith practices which promote the best and truest sense of what is meant by the word “piety”: godliness; holiness; and reverence for God. Likewise, the early Methodists referred to the latter as “*Acts of Mercy*” because they are actions and practices that exhibit and reflect the mercy and compassion of God towards other human beings. In this sense, then, “Personal Holiness/Acts of Piety” and “Social Holiness/Acts of Mercy” constitute, in effect, the two equally important pillars/dimensions of Sanctification / Sanctifying Grace.
3. As an example of this scripture “in action,” the story is told that Samuel Bradburn, an associate of the founder of Methodism John Wesley, was on one occasion in rather desperate financial need. When Wesley learned of his circumstances, he sent him a five-pound note (then worth about \$10) with the following letter: “*Dear Sammy: Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed*’. Yours affectionately, John Wesley.” Bradburn’s reply was prompt. “*Rev. and Dear Sir: I have often been struck with the beauty of the passage of Scripture quoted in your letter, but I must confess that I never saw such a useful expository note on it before.*”
4. So much so that Christian author Ron Sider has noted that “*the Bible says more about God’s concern for the poor than it does about prayer, or the Atonement, or Jesus’ resurrection*” (Ronald Sider, One-Sided Christianity, p. 141).
5. For example, read Leviticus 19:10 and 23:22.
6. For example, read Jeremiah 22:13-16.
7. Throughout the writings of the Paul, we find that he fully believed that personal conversion would involve and lead to a radical change of heart on the part of the individual, and be expressed in a different set of ethical values and modes of behavior. See for example 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, where he chides his converts for immorality, or for failing to live a genuine communal life together.
8. In addition to this parable, bear in mind that throughout his ministry as recorded in the New Testament gospels, Jesus not only SPEAKS and teaches about the importance of social salvation/holiness, but he also ENACTS it through his own actions. For example, he heals and conducts exorcisms. He shows compassion to the poor and outcast of society who have not had compassion shown to them before. Even his miracles are a way for him to demonstrate social holiness by addressing the physical, spiritual, emotional, and relational needs of others.
9. Alan Walker, speaking in South Africa in 1980, cited in Ronald Sider, One-Sided Christianity?, p. 137.
10. John Wesley (founder of Methodism) insisted in 18th-century England that his early Methodists maintain this vital biblical balance between personal and social holiness. In his sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” he explains this balance:...

“But what good works are those, the practice of which you affirm to be necessary to sanctification?”
First, all works of piety: such as public prayer, family prayer, and praying in our closet; receiving the supper of the Lord; searching the Scriptures, by hearing, reading, meditating; and using such a measure of fasting or abstinence as our bodily health allows. Secondly, all works of mercy:

whether they relate to the bodies or souls of men; such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those that are in prison, or sick, or variously afflicted; such as the endeavouring to instruct the ignorant, to awaken the stupid sinner, to quicken the lukewarm, to confirm the wavering, to comfort the feeble-minded, to succour the tempted, or contribute in any manner to the saving of souls from death. This is the repentance, and these the "fruits meet for repentance," which are necessary to full sanctification. This is the way wherein God hath appointed his children to wait for complete salvation."

[--John Wesley, Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation", cited in Albert Outler, The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6, p. 51]

11. Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582).

12. As an evangelism document called the "Manila Manifesto" summarizes: "*Good News and good works are inseparable [partners]*" [See Ronald Sider, One-Sided Christianity?, p. 175.