

WRETCHED

Amazing Grace

At a young age, he was a merchant sailor with whose reputation was so bad that it made other sailors blush. Before long, he became British slave trader. So wretched was he, that even his crew was disgusted. Once in a drunken stupor he fell overboard. To rescue him, crewmembers threw a harpoon through his leg so they could pull him back on board.

On another of his voyages, his ship nearly sank in a fierce storm. They lost most of the food, their ability to navigate, and were literally within days of cannibalism. By the time they reached land, John Newton finally recognized God's hand on his life. Newton left his ungodly ways, stopped slave trading, and became a pastor committed to ending slavery.

Saved by grace

John Newton was not being humble when he wrote "that saved a wretch like me." Slave traders are pretty low on the "sinners" list. The apostle Paul tells us in [1st Timothy 1:10](#), that enslavers rate down there with those who kill their parents.

Wretch is a pretty strong term; To be wretched is to be hopeless, Despicable; hatefully vile and contemptible.

Q: What goes through your head when you sing "a wretch like me"? Do you have an honest recognition of your state? Do you think, "That's me – Hopeless and despicable, in desperate need of God's grace." Or do you think, "That's putting it a little harsh." We should replace "wretch like me" with "wretch like Joel." If we're honest with ourselves, most of us think we stack up pretty well in the grand scheme of things.

To those who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:

“Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

– Luke 18:9-14 KJV

We cannot receive God’s saving grace until we repent of our sins. I’ve had a chance to witness to a young man who has trouble understanding this fact. He freely admits that he has made a mess of many things in his life, but he thinks that he can make up for them by doing good deeds. In his case he plans to enter the military. Perhaps the military is where God wants to use him, but he cannot work off his sins in the military. He, just like all of us, must honestly and humbly admit his wretched state to God.

Grace alone can save a wretch like me. (Repeat that with me, but insert your own name.)

Not getting what we deserve

What exactly is grace? We use the word in so many ways: we say grace before meals, credit cards have a grace period, and people have been named Grace.

The grace Newton wrote about is God’s saving grace. Grace is to not receive the punishment we deserve for our wretchedness.

Example 1:

Let say you got pulled over for doing 70 down Hospital Drive; not only that, but your tags are expired, your license is revoked, there’s no insurance on the car, you’re not wearing a seat belt,

and to top it off, you swear at the officer and ask him why he isn't guarding Dunkin Donuts.

If he lets you off with a stern warning, you could call that grace.

Getting better than we deserve

But grace is even more. Grace is the application of Christ's righteousness to the sinner (GRACE = Gods riches at Christ's Expense). An undeserved blessing freely bestowed on man by God. It is this incredible kindness that He shows us, in ways both great and small.

Example 2:

Now say you're a server at IHOP and you're having a horrible day; you're late for work (which is why you were speeding earlier), you mess some guy's order, spill water and then pour coffee on him, and swear at him again (Again because your customer is the same officer who pulled you over earlier).

Now imagine he gives you a \$200 tip – that's grace. Grace is getting better than we deserve.

Depths of grace

Now back to John Newton: I love stories of dramatic conversions, those 180° changes. We've had some come through our church with such stories. I love them, but I can't fully relate. Most of us have a "three steps forward, two steps back" walk with the Lord. We often mean well, but our actions don't quite match our intentions.

When I told you about Newton's conversion, I left a key piece of information: From the time from when he became a Christian until when he gave up slave trading was six years. And it took 25 more years for him to speak out against slavery.

Perhaps what makes grace so amazing is its depth. God is amazingly patient with frail and failing people, like John Newton, like you and like me.

Reflection

* Q Do you know someone who has been “saved,” but never changed?

* Q Are you that someone?

God’s patience is often mistaken for permission to sin. Paul addressed this in Romans:

What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid. Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?

-Romans 6:15-16 KJV

When we, as genuine believers, take grace as permission to continue sinning, it shows we don’t understand sin. Sin is a fatal disease, something to get away from, not something to get away with.

Sin is what destroys us, destroys others, and destroys our relationship with God – that’s why God wants us to be free from it.

It is the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit that leads us to holiness, and away from sin, is a gift of grace, not burden.

Grace is freedom from sin, not freedom to sin.

As John Newton reached the end of his life and thought back on those six years he spent as a “Christian” slave trader, did he think, “Look what I got away with!”? Or, did he more likely think “Through many dangers, toils and snares, You, Lord, have lead

me home; dangers I put myself in, toils and pain I inflicted on myself and others, snares that nearly snagged my soul.”?

When it is our turn to stand before God, and we clearly seeing how much damage our sins did, will we say “Wow, look at all I got away with,” or will we say, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”

Note: While I had been teaching Sunday school class and had done other things at church, this was the first “real” sermon I ever put together. Though short, it still remains one of my favorites.