

## More Than A Pretty Name

On Sunday, Pastor Vivian invited us to ponder one of the core concepts of our faith – grace.

1. Warm up question. Vivian began her sermon with the story behind the writing of “Amazing Grace,” perhaps the most famous hymn ever written. What’s one of your favorite spiritual songs?
2. Grace is often defined as “unmerited favor.” “Unmerited” means not deserved or earned. “Favor” means an act of kindness beyond what is due. Put them together and you get, “A kindness beyond the norm that you really don’t deserve and can’t do anything to earn.” To illustrate grace in action, Vivian reminded us of the story told in *Les Miserables*. Jean ValJean spends 19 years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread. When he’s released, a kind bishop gives him shelter. But ValJean gets up in the middle of the night, steals the bishop’s silver, and runs off. When the police return with ValJean in tow, the bishop pretends to have given the silver to him. As the police leave, the bishop says, “Jean ValJean, my brother, I have bought your soul from you. I take it back from evil thoughts and deeds and the spirit of Hell and I give it to God.” That act of grace transforms ValJean forever.
  - a. Before he experienced grace, ValJean was trapped in his past. Others saw him as a criminal, so that’s how he came to see himself. What negative messages from your past tend to replay in your head and threaten to keep you down?
  - b. If the bishop in *Les Miserables* was standing before you, what positive message of grace might he speak to counteract that negative message that replays in your head?
  - c. What keeps you from receiving that message of grace?
3. On Sunday we read a medley of verses about grace.
  - a. Isaiah 53:6 says, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.” Do you believe that to be true of yourself? Why or why not?
  - b. Ephesians 2:8 says, “By grace you have been saved through faith – and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the results of works, so that no one may boast.” What do you get from this verse?
  - c. In Ezekiel 36:26, God says, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you. . . .” How does that happen? How do we get a “new heart”?
  - d. Romans 6:1-2 says, “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” What do you get from this verse?

- e. As best you understand, how does God's grace work? In other words, what is it about grace that changes us?
  - f. Does God's grace have to be received to be effective? If so, how do we receive grace?
4. To test the limits of God's grace, Vivian asked us to imagine Hitler in heaven. "Suppose when Hitler died, he came into the presence of God and said, 'Oh, I was so very wrong. I am so sorry for all the horrible things I did. I once was blind, but now I see. I am so sorry. Please forgive me.' Would God then say, sorry Charley?" What do you think? If Hitler repented while standing before God after death, how do you think God would respond – and why?
  5. Genesis 6:8 says, "Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord." As we look back over life, with the benefit of time, we can often say the same about ourselves. Vivian shared how, after being driven away from church by an abusive pastor, years later her brother-in-law kept pestering her to go to his church. Vivian said, "We walked in the door and immediately, immediately, I felt God's love filling holes that I never even knew were there." When have you "found grace in the eyes of the Lord?" What's something that God's grace saved you from or brought you to?
  6. II Corinthians 8:7 says, "Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you – so we want you to excel in this grace also." God shows us grace and in return we are called to show it to others.
    - a. God called Jonah to preach to the Ninevites, who were the enemies of Israel. Jonah resisted because he hated the Ninevites and knew that, if they repented, God would show them grace. We often feel the same way. We've received grace, but struggle to offer that same grace to others. In your life right now, who are you struggling to show grace to? Why is it so hard to offer grace to that person?
    - b. Vivian said, "If you accept grace, you have to give grace." Do you buy that? Why or why not? Is there a correlation between our ability to give grace to ourselves and our ability to give it to others?
    - c. Vivian said, "You can build a wall of hate if you want, but you will be the one contained. Every brick of resentment, anger, and hate makes the wall around you higher." Have you ever observed or experienced this phenomenon?
    - d. When we struggle to show grace, what can help? What are some things that can help us get to a place of genuinely offering grace to someone who doesn't deserve it?