**New-Ark Emmaus**

**Justifying Grace**

During the summers when I was in college I worked for an excavating company. Those summers were filled with hard work on long hot days. As it happened, we were working over an hour away and we had a long drive home in heavy traffic and I was hot and I was tired and I was filthy dirty and muddy. So dirty in fact, that I wore very little clothing on the way home. When I got home, I had one goal on my mind: get a shower and get to the Hartford Fair where I knew I could eat some food and see my girl. I made one mistake in my quest though, I checked the phone messages.

On the message was my dear sweet grandfather, my most favorite person in the whole world. He had called to say that his band was playing at the fair that night and they were short a bass player and could I play. I looked at the clock, I had 15 minutes to get there. So, I went. The whole time thinking about my goal: getting some food and seeing my girlfriend. Well, we completed our concert and wouldn’t you know they wanted an encore, which is funny since we weren’t very good. So we played a few more songs, then my dear sweet grandfather, my favorite person in the whole world asked me to help him carry his instruments back to his vehicle. Well, I couldn’t say no to him, so we started out carrying all these instruments clear across the fairground because he didn’t park in the exhibitors lot, or in the handicap lot, so we started walking. We walked so far that we got to my pride and joy, my pick up truck clear in the back of the lot. By then he realized that he had forgotten where he parked. So we walked back and forth. Finally, as it was getting dark and I had not had dinner yet and I was pretty sure my girlfriend was waiting on me somewhere, I suggested that we put the instruments in my truck and drive to find his vehicle.

So we drove up and down and up and down the aisles and as we approached the front of the lot there was a truck headed toward me and moved to the right to avoid him, not knowing that I was about to hit a trailer and boy did I hit that trailer! So, I jumped out and checked and sure enough there was a scratch and a dent right down the side of it. I got back into the truck and Grandpa says, “Is it scratched?” I didn’t respond.

We pulled up by the barn where we could see it better and my friends and my girlfriend all gathered around to see the damage and Grandpa gets out and innocently asks again, “Is it scratched?” At that moment I unloaded a whole day’s worth of frustration and anger and stress on my poor, unsuspecting, dear, sweet grandfather whom I dearly love. On top of that I added a couple year’s worth of foul language that I had learned working at the excavating company. This is the man I admire and love and respect the most in the whole world. And I really profanely cursed him out in a most terrible way.

At that moment I could no longer see myself walking around looking for his vehicle so I drove him home. It was a very quiet ride home. Very quiet. I dropped him off and drove home in anger. When I finally came to my senses and realized the stupidity of my choices and decisions I felt extreme guilt and shame. I wasted a whole night wallowing in emotions ranging from anger to self-pity and loathing. The hours until morning could not pass quickly enough to morning when I could begin what I thought would be a process of forgiveness and restoration.

The next morning I went to his house to sheepishly ask forgiveness. I didn’t even make it up the steps, he met me on the porch. He had already forgiven me. In fact, he acted as if it had never happened except to suggest that he pay for the damages. I thought I was going to have a long hard road ahead of me to repair the relationship I so desperately needed with my grandfather. I assumed that I had done so much damage to our relationship that it was irreparable. What I found was that there was nothing I could do or say to fix it. I also realized that there was nothing I could do or say to harm our relationship. My grandfather forgave me simply because he loved me. He loved me unconditionally. He sought me out on the porch with forgiveness, and invited me into his house with love. It was up to me to accept it.

**The title of this talk is \*Justifying Grace and my name is \*Dave Warner.**

As I’ve grown older I’ve come to realize that my Grandfather is merely following the example of his heavenly Father.

**\*God offers us a relationship of unconditional love and grace.**

To truly understand this relationship of unconditional love and grace, we must go way back, all the way back to the beginning of time and the Creator’s intent for creation. If we believe in God and we believe in the account that God gives us in Genesis then we must acknowledge that **\*God created all things in the cosmos, the earth, including humanity and at the time of creation, \*God declared it to be good.**

Adam and Eve were given freedom of choice, freedom of will to choose to do right or choose to do wrong. In the case of my grandfather and I, I had a choice, I could have done the right things or the wrong things. I chose the right things most of that fateful day, but by the very end I had chosen the wrong things. Those wrong choices separate us from the one we love. I felt as if we were separated. **\*Our wrong choices separate us from God, but God’s gift of unconditional love and grace are greater than all our wrong choices.**

We often go looking for unconditional love in all the wrong places. Isn’t that a song? We continue to make wrong choices in order to fulfill some sort of need or emptiness in our life. **\***St. Augustine calls this a “God-shaped hole” in all of our lives. The problem with looking forlove in all the wrong places is that we never are satisfied. It never really fills the need and the longing that we have. So, we just keep searching and looking and making the wrong choices. Further separating ourselves from the One thing that we desperately want and need: a relationship.

**\***The Bible is the story of humanity’s quest for fulfillment of that need. Jesus is the Bible’s central character at bringing humanity into the relationship it so desperately needs. Our problem is that once we finally realize that what we are really looking for is a relationship with God, we confuse that relationship with a list of rules, some do’s and don’ts. Or rather, a lot of do’s and don’ts. We think that if we just do this or merely don’t do that – then, THEN God will love us. Or Christians will accept us. Or the Church will finally love me. Or my guilt will actually be gone.

What God offers us is much different, **\*God offers us a personal relationship, not a list of do’s and don’ts.**  Similar to my grandfather extending our relationship rather than scolding and correcting me. God offers us a personal relationship, not a list of do’s and don’ts.

**\*Our Acceptance of the Relationship**

**\*Justifying grace is at work in the moment was say yes to the relationship God offers us in Christ. \*Our acceptance changes everything.**

The night that I wasted after damaging my truck and thinking that I ruined my relationship with my grandfather was a very long night. I was wracked with guilt. I felt terrible. I knew it was over. I was in misery. Justifying grace is seen so well in the turning away from misery and returning to the relationship. **\*With God, we are restored to an eternal relationship with the One who knows and loves us better than we know and love.**

There is a story call **The Prodigal Son, Luke 15**. **\***The Prodigal son had every advantage in the world yet he squandered his inherited fortune from his father and went away to live the best this life had to offer. Eventually the money was gone and he found himself being jealous of what the pigs were eating so he decided to return home. **Luke 15:20-24** tells of the reception he received when he came home:

*20So he got up and went to his father.*

*“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

*21“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’*

*22“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.*

This is the kind of celebration that God has for us when we return to Him or turn to Him in the first place. There is a welcoming back into the house of God.

For me, I had a choice that next day after destroying my relationship with Grandpa. Grandpa met me on the porch with his forgiveness and out of his love he invited me into his house. Suppose I didn’t accept my Grandfather’s forgiveness? Suppose for a moment that I felt so terrible about what I had done that I refused to enjoy my Grandfather’s forgiveness? Suppose I hung on to that guilt simply so I could continue to punish myself. If he won’t punish me, then I will punish me. The non-acceptance of Justifying grace is the seed of future guilt and bitterness. Hanging to our guilt and not accepting our relationship with God is a futile effort to seek our own peace on our own terms. Furthermore, it is one more way that we look for something in the wrong place.

**\*When we accept God’s grace, we say yes to the One who has been wooing and pursuing us, desiring a relationship with us.** Earlier, you heard a talk on God’s Prevenient grace. That God is actively pursuing us before we are even conscious of Him. God is like my Grandpa, there on the porch waiting for us. That’s Prevenient grace, the Porch. But Justifying Grace is the invitation into the house. Grandpa met me on the porch, but he didn’t leave me there, he invited me in. I could’ve denied the invitation. But the proper response is to say “Yes” to the invitation, to accept the invitation. To say, “Yes” to the one who has been wooing and pursuing and join God in the house of salvation. To enter into the door of justifying grace.

**\*Responding to God’s grace is an act of faith.** Our natural inclination is to assume that we must do something to earn the grace. We have to feel like we are doing something to deserve it. We don’t want the free lunch because we don’t want to owe anyone. But all we really need to do is accept. All we really need to do is receive. That is an act of faith in itself because we have to trust that God will do what God says God will do without us actually *doing* anything. It feels like a handout. Most of us don’t want a handout because we want to feel like we have earned it or somehow deserved but we can not earn or deserve grace. It is a simple gift and we just receive and respond.

This act of justification is also referred to as *salvation*. **\***Salvation happens in an instant but it occurs for eternity. The movement from the porch of Prevenient Grace through the Door of Justifying Grace is salvation. We can not do anything to earn or deserve salvation, it is a simple, free gift. We can only accept or deny. It is all God’s work through Jesus Christ, it is not our faith that saves us, it is God’s grace.

**\*Justifying grace is most clearly illustrated by the cross of Jesus Christ.** **Romans 5:6-8** tells us, *6You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Jesus died on the cross for us, so that we might be in relationship with God through him. His death on the cross provided the way for us to pass through the threshold, to come off the porch and into the House of Salvation.

**\***If you think of the cross, picture one in your mind, there are two lines: a vertical line and a horizontal line. The vertical line points straight to heaven, to God. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross restored our relationship with God. The upward movement of our relationship with God. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross also restored our relationship with others, with our neighbor. That is easily symbolized by the horizontal line of the cross. The cross is all about love, listen to these words from a song called The Sign of Love:

*The cross is the sign of love for all*

*Its arms stretched wide, its love stands tall*

*Come into the warm embrace don’t fall*

*The cross is the sign of love, love for all*

This is paralleled by Jesus’ summary of the 2 greatest commandments: to Love God and Love Others. Jesus’ cross puts us into a position where we can love God and love Others.

Our conversion, our salvation experience is not a simple matter of moments, but more of a lifetime of living out that commitment. Just as a bride and a groom are not finished on their wedding day, they are only beginning. **\*Our conversion continues as we keep saying yes to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.**  As we mature in our faith God will open up new things to us, new ideas, new aspects of our lives as we come to understand ourselves better and acknowledge our continual need for Christ. We also continue in our conversion experience as we come to understand God better and seek God’s will in our lives. We also continue to grow in our conversion as we practice spiritual disciplines of prayer, scripture reading, mediation, and active obedience in the ongoing conversion of our will to God’s will.

**God’s Activity and Our Response**

**\*Justifying grace is double acceptance.** God said yes to us in creation and on the cross. It is upon us to say yes to the relationship God offers us in Christ. God has really put himself out there to us to say, “I love you.” What is your response? I remember as a young man getting up the courage to tell my girlfriend, who is now my wife. “I, uh, I, uh, ahem, I – I – I l,l,l,love you.” You are really throwing yourself out there because you don’t know what the other person will say! You are hoping for acceptance. You are hoping for a reciprocation. You are pining to be in a relationship with that person and you have already accepted them, now you wait for them to accept you back. There is a longing to hear the words, “I love you too!” When God extends His prevenient grace to you, that grace that has gone before you ever knew God, it is God’s way of saying, “I love you.” Are you ready to say, “I love you too.” ? Are you ready to respond and enter into the relationship with God through Jesus Christ?

**\*God addresses our intellect** – its not purely based on an emotional experience, our brains are involved, we make an informed decision as to what God is leading us to do. **Romans 12:2a,***2Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* It’s a head thing.

**\*God touches our hearts**- it isn’t just a head thing, our hearts are involved too. We respond in love and enthusiasm, but we do not depend upon our feelings as our sole influencer of choices. It’s a heart thing.

**\*God appeals to our wills**– it is a free choice. We don’t have to accept that relationship. We don’t have to say, “I do” or “I love you too.” We are not forced to love God. **Matthew 16:24,** *24Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

**\*God calls us to discipleship** – our discipleship requires trust and obedience. Discipleship is the process of being transformed into the image of Christ for the sake of others. We cannot be changed or transformed on our own, we merely make room in our lives for the Holy Spirit to work within us to be transformed in the image of Christ for the sake of others. **Matthew 28:18-20,** *18Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

God knows and speaks to us each individually to bring us continually in a right relationship with him. God speaks to our minds, our hearts, our wills and our sense of commitment by calling us to discipleship with him.

I hope and pray that you have gotten off the porch of Prevenient Grace. God has been searching for you, looking for you, calling for you, longing for you, wooing you and now he invites you to come into his house of Salvation. There’s nothing you can do to earn it or deserve, you are only worthy because of the One who has called you…you are a child of God, that is simply enough to make you worthy of God’s love. Now that he has invited you, why not take that next step through the door of Justifying grace? God has said, “I love you.” Are you ready to say, “I love you too.”? Say yes to Jesus. Say yes to his gift of grace. Accept his love and give it back to Him through loving others around you.

Introduction of Agape –

One way God moves us to the point of acceptance, healing , salvation or conversion is through the loving acts of other Christians. This kind of **\***God-love is called *agape*, the Greek word for God’s unconditional, gracious love. We can never earn or deserve God’s love ; it is a gift of grace. During this weekend, Christians will express unconditional love to you in sacrificial ways by praying, serving, and performing other acts of agape – so that you will know more clearly how much God loves you. Emmaus communities from across this nation and around the world have sent letters and other forms of communication to let you know about this agape love.

**\*De Colores!**

**Scripture References**

Genesis

Luke 15

Luke 15: 20-24

Romans 5: 6-8

Romans 12: 2a

Matthew 16: 24

Matthew 28: 18-20