



Thank you for your interest in Stories of Grace—a seven-week study of the book of the parables of Jesus.

The pages which follow include:

- An overview of this series (4 pages)
- A sample sermon/class outline (6 pages)
- A sample handout (4 pages)

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Stories of Grace:

Preaching Grace from the Parables of Jesus

“Stories of Grace” is a seven-week series that gets at the subject of grace through the parables Jesus told. Most of our preaching on this topic is rooted in Paul. That makes sense—Paul had a great deal to say about the matter. Since Jesus never used the word “grace,” we’ve assumed that there is more to be learned about this subject in the epistles than in the gospels.

But what if, in running past Jesus to get to Paul, we have missed hearing something important from our Lord? Though Jesus does not use the word, he speaks about grace almost constantly—you just have to listen more carefully to him to hear what he has to say.

It is in his parables, especially, that we hear Jesus proclaim a message about God’s grace. Whether the story tells of God throwing a banquet for the poor or welcoming home a lost son, or forgiving debts which cannot be paid—grace is often the point Jesus is making.

In this series, you will preach through the parable of the Pharisee and Tax-collector, the Prodigal Son, the Workers in the Vineyard, the Moneylender, the Unmerciful Servant, and the Parable of the Talents. Along the way, you will help your audience think about the scope of God’s grace, our tendency either to abuse or refuse it, how “unfair” grace (thankfully) is, and how a grace that does not transform us may well destroy us.

There has been more debate, more confusion, more conflict over the subject of grace than any other doctrine in the religion of Jesus. Yet many of our people know little more about it than a Sunday School definition—“unmerited favor” . . . as if the richness of grace can be captured in two words.

But there is a great deal more to learn about grace—information which will be helpful not only to the church but to our individual Christian lives as well. I am all for studying Paul to better understand grace. But Paul did not have the first word on this topic—Jesus did. Before we skip over the gospels to get to grace, perhaps we should pause at the feet of our Lord and hear what he says on the subject.

Bibliography

Specific Works

Blomberg, Craig L. Interpreting the Parables. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. 1990. 334 pgs. This book is a more scholarly study of the parables. The first half discusses current theories of interpreting the parables. The second applies those theories to individual parables. This book is well written and carefully thought out. Highly recommended.

Kistemaker, Simon. The Parables of Jesus. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. 1980. 301 pgs. A good, solid treatment of the parables. The book is devoted to detailed exposition of individual parables.

Stott, John R. W. Christ the Controversialist. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. 1970. 214 pgs. Full of wonderful insights on the thinking of Jesus—particularly where it rubbed against the popular religious thinking of his day. The fourth chapter (pgs 106-132) will be especially helpful for understanding the parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector.

Wenham, David. The Parables of Jesus. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. 1989. 256 pgs. You will enjoy this book. Wenham has good insights on individual parables. I especially like his view of the parables as “tales of revolution.” You will appreciate the way he has organized the parables and the freshness he brings to their study.

General Works

Fee, Gordon, and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House. 1982. 237 pgs. Review esp. pgs. 123-134 on the parables.

MacArthur, Jr., John F. The Gospel According to Jesus. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House. 1994. 302 pgs. There is a great debate raging in evangelical circles on the subject of grace. If you are unfamiliar with this discussion, you will want to read the first few chapters to grasp the difficulties posed by grace for modern Christendom. MacArthur also does detailed work with individual parables. The 14th and 15th chapters will be helpful to you in this regard.

Stein, Robert H. The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press. 1978. 188 pgs. A general overview of Christ's teaching ministry. Pay special attention to Stein's general comments on parables (pgs. 34-59).

Sermon Summaries

I have included two forms of support for your preaching in this packet.

The first is a weekly handout for your congregation, which is closely tied to the sermon outlines. These handouts include:

- a summary of the main point of the sermon (any changes you might make to the sermons may require you to make changes to the handouts as well),
- a daily Bible study your members can work through during the week, and
- a “What do I do now?” segment featuring JB and Rosy—two characters who will remind you of some of the people you preach to each week. (Look at page 4 of the handouts for an introduction to JB and Rosy.)

You should make copies of these handouts for your Sunday morning audience. They were designed for distribution at the worship assembly, so that your members have a preview of what you will be preaching and a tool for study and reflection during the rest of the week. Many churches mail these handouts to absentees to help traveling members keep up with the study.

Then there are the sermon outlines themselves. Each outline is 6 pages in length—a lot of information! I tend, however, to speak quickly and for about 30 minutes. You may want to use these outlines verbatim, modify them to your own style and situation, or throw them out entirely. I hope they can at least serve as a starting point for your own preparation.

Sermon Title	Text	Page #s Outline	Page #s Handout
1. Getting at Grace This first sermon in the series points out that we most often turn to Paul to learn about the subject of grace. But Jesus also has much to say on the topic, if only we listen carefully to him. The parables are presented as “Stories of Grace.” It is suggested that, rather than preaching sermons on the subject, Jesus told stories. One of those stories (about a Pharisee and a tax collector) must have struck home to Paul, summarizing much about his life and relationship with God.	Luke 18:9-14	1-6	1-4
2. The Grace Dilemma For some reason, people have a difficult time responding graciously to a gracious God. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is reviewed. The gracious father in this story is treated poorly by both of his sons. One abuses his grace. There are still those who respond to God’s grace by treating it as a cheap thing or as something real Christians don’t actually need.	Luke 15:11-32	7-12	5-8

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|---|---------------------|--------------|--------------|
| 3. Come to the Feast | Mt 22:2-14 | 13-18 | 9-12 |
| <p>This parable again shows us people who treated a gracious man badly. Some refused to come to his party. One came, but offended his host by refusing to wear an appropriate garment. How many today refuse God's kind invitation? And how many come to the feast in their old clothes, too proud or too stubborn to live lives appropriate for the presence of God?</p> | | | |
| 4. Kicking Grace | Luke 7:36-50 | 19-24 | 13-16 |
| <p>It is so easy to make grace a theological concept . . . to squeeze the life out of it with our endless discussion and fine distinctions. But grace is a life-giving force. It is the dynamic which fuels life in the kingdom. As we study the Parable of the Moneylender, we notice that people who have been forgiven much tend to love much. But those who don't feel much need for grace don't feel much love either.</p> | | | |
| 5. The Things We Do for Love | Mt 18:27-34 | 25-32 | 17-20 |
| <p>The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant reinforces the point you made in "Kicking Grace." Grace is intended to change us. What we experience in the throne room must make a difference in the way we live outside the throne room. When "grace received" does not translate into transformation, this parable implies that grace might be revoked.</p> | | | |
| 6. An Unfair Grace | Mt 20:1-16 | 33-38 | 21-24 |
| <p>You must be careful what you say about God's grace. You don't have to deny grace to do real damage to it. Just measure it out with your own yardstick . . . require that it conform to your sense of fairness. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard confronts us with a Master who is not concerned with our notions of what is fair. It is his mercy, and he will do with it what he pleases!</p> | | | |
| 7. Why Talk about Grace? | Mt 20:1-16 | 39-44 | 25-28 |
| <p>The Parable of the Talents teaches us that only a disciple who understands the true nature of his Master will be productive in the kingdom. For some strange reason, we think that grace is for beginners—that the word of grace must eventually make way for a word about "the hard man." But the truth is we must constantly talk about grace—to the novice and the mature—because only those who are convinced of the goodness of God can dare to be obedient to him.</p> | | | |

Getting at Grace

Move One: The Back Door to Grace

Most of us come to grace like Martin Luther—late and through the back door.

Not until he was an adult and a professor of theology did Luther fall into grace.

1. He grew up with fearful images of hell and demons and the wrath of God. He was raised in a church that stressed the utter sinfulness of man, the horrors of God's punishment, and the need to offset sin with good works.
2. As a young man, Luther studied the law. But after several brushes with death, he abandoned school and entered a monastery.
3. He threw himself into the most rigorous disciplines, trying to find peace with God through prolonged bouts of prayer, fasting, and study.
4. But there was no peace for Luther. It was of this period of his life that Luther would later comment, "Love God? I hated him!"
5. This inner struggle continued for years.

It may seem strange to us that someone so devoted to Christ, so involved in the work of the church, so knowledgeable of scripture would have such a hard time accepting God's mercies. Or perhaps it does not seem strange at all. Perhaps some of us—also devoted and involved and knowledgeable—find ourselves struggling alongside Luther with the same issues.

It wasn't until he was lecturing through Galatians and Romans that Luther hit on the astonishing notion we are saved by God's grace.

1. He heard Paul talking about sin and forgiveness and the mercies of God.
2. He read about the God who saves and sanctifies and transforms.
3. He claims he was sitting in the bathroom, meditating on Romans, when the idea of justification through faith hit him like a thunderbolt!

That's what I meant by Luther coming to grace through the "back door." He only got to grace by going through the Apostle Paul.

1. Now, I'm all for getting at grace any way you can.
2. Most of us are introduced to grace through the writings of this same Apostle.
3. But isn't there any more direct way to get at grace?
 - a. If we must wait until we can spell expiation and propitiation before we can get at grace, no wonder we have to be Christians for 20 years before understanding this basic concept.
 - b. Isn't there a more direct way to get at grace—something even a child could understand?
 - c. How did people learn about grace before they had the writings of Paul? For that matter, how did *Paul* get at grace?

Move Two: How Did Paul Get at Grace?

Paul was a man who grappled with grace. He thought long and hard on the subject. It stood at the very center of the gospel he preached.

4. He uses the word “grace” some 88 times in his writings.
5. The word is mentioned in every one of his 13 epistles.
6. Long sections of his letters are taken up with a discussion of grace.

After many years of trying to get his arms around grace, Paul would make some bold, audacious, daring statements on the topic:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace . . . (Ro 3:23-24)

You are not under law, but under grace. (Ro 6:14)

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Eph 2:8, 9)

[God] has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. (2 Tim 1:9)

For all its dangers, in spite of the many ways grace could be misunderstood and abused, Paul insisted on preaching a bold, brave, broad message of God’s grace. The “chief of sinners,” understood grace in a way few people have. Most of what we know about grace comes from the writings of Paul.

It doesn’t come as much of a surprise, then, that when preachers want to talk about grace (or someone like Luther wants to learn about grace) they turn to Paul. There is so much grist about grace in Romans and Galatians and Ephesians, we rarely feel the need to go elsewhere to think about this topic.

But where did Paul learn the “ABCs” of grace?

1. Was Paul’s understanding of grace rooted in his own experience on the road to Damascus?
2. Did Ananias instruct him in grace when he baptized him? (Ac 9:17-19)
3. Was it while he was off in Arabia (Ga 1:17-18) that the Spirit taught Paul what he needed to know about the gospel of grace?

We may never know just how Paul learned all he knew about grace. But I want to suggest that Paul learned about grace in the same way you and I can learn about grace—from the source . . . from the horse’s mouth . . . from Jesus himself.

Move Three: What does Jesus have to say about grace?

It is odd that the founder of the “religion of grace” should never address the subject directly. Search through the teachings of Jesus. He says much about “mercy” and “forgiveness” and the “love of God.” But he never uses the word “grace.” We have accepted this strange silence on the part of Jesus and run to Paul to develop a theology of grace. We’ve assumed that there is so much more about grace in the epistles than in the gospels.

But what if—in running past Jesus to get to Paul—we have failed to hear something important from our Lord? Just because Jesus never uses the word “grace” doesn’t mean he has nothing to say on the subject. In fact, Jesus spoke constantly about grace—you simply have to listen more carefully to hear what he says.

Much that Jesus said about grace was spoken with actions rather than words.

1. Recall how he invited Matthew the tax-collector to be his disciple? That was an act of grace, though there was no sermon about grace to go with it.
2. Remember how he treated the woman caught in adultery? Jesus was teaching about grace, though he did not use the word to label his action.
3. And do you recollect the story of the thief on the cross? What Jesus did for that man drips with grace, though the word itself does not appear.
4. Jesus talked a great deal about grace through the way he treated people.

And Jesus said a great deal about grace when he described his Father, though—again—he did not use the word “grace” itself. According to Jesus:

1. *This God* loves the world and wants everyone to be saved.
2. *This God* opens the kingdom to tax-collectors and prostitutes.
3. *This God* sends rain on the unjust, and is kind even to the wicked.
4. *This God* rejoices over one sinner who repents.
5. And *this God* sent his Son to “preach good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, release for the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).
6. Jesus said a mouthful about grace every time he talked about his Father.

But, especially in his parables, we hear Jesus talking about God’s grace.

1. In one parable, God invites the most unlikely people to a great banquet.
2. In another, he welcomes back a son who was lost.
3. In another, he forgives debts which cannot be repaid.
4. In still another, he gives generously to anyone who has worked in his vineyard, whether they have worked long or short.

Grace is often the point of the parables of Jesus. Where we might have preferred *pronouncements* about grace, Jesus chose to give us *portraits*. We’ve been frustrated looking for Jesus’ *sermons* on this subject, while all along Jesus has been telling us *stories*. Like this one:

Move Four: Paul and the Parable of the Tax Collector and Pharisee

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. (Luke 18:9-14)

A simple story:

1. This parable tells of two men who go to the Temple to pray.
 - a. Each wants God to be pleased with him.
 - b. Each utters a prayer designed to win God's favor.
 - c. Each leaves the Temple hoping that he had been heard.
2. Of course, there is a vast difference between these two.
 - a. The Pharisee, so confident in his own righteousness, gave God what he thought God wanted to hear—a recitation of his virtues.
 - b. The tax-collector—having few virtues to recite—offers God something else: a penitent heart, a sense of shame, a plea for mercy.
3. What is stunning about this parable, however, is not what it tells us about Pharisees or tax-collectors, but what it says about God.
 - a. God listens to prayers—even the prayer of a sinner like this tax-collector.
 - b. God wants to justify people . . . he truly wants to be merciful.
 - c. He is gracious to those who will humble themselves before him. After all, he sends this tax-collector home justified.
 - d. But he has little patience with those who put confidence in their own goodness—the Pharisee, for all his virtues, was not right with God.

Did Paul know about this Parable?

1. There is no indication in the writings of Paul that he was familiar with it. He doesn't retell the story in any of his letters. He doesn't quote any snippets from the parable. He never once speaks of a tax collector.
2. But I think Paul must have known about this parable.
 - a. Perhaps he heard the story when he visited with Peter and the other apostles on his first trip to Jerusalem.
 - b. Or, maybe, he heard it from Luke, who traveled with Paul extensively while in the process of writing his gospel.

Whenever it was Paul heard this parable for the first time, it must have fallen on him like a ton of bricks.

1. Because—for Paul—this wouldn't have been just an interesting parable about a nameless Pharisee and an anonymous tax collector.
2. Paul would have immediately seen in this story his own biography.
 - a. For *he* had been the Pharisee, so confident of his own righteousness.
 - b. And *he* had also been the tax collector, beating his breast and begging God to be merciful to a sinner.

Move Five: The Story of Paul

You remember Paul the Pharisee. Oh, he had been so proud of himself, so confident of his righteousness, so sure that God was pleased with him!

. . . circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee . . . as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. (Phil 3:5-6)

He was trained at the feet of the best teacher in Israel. He was advanced in Judaism beyond many his own age—a rising star in the religion of his fathers. He was as zealous for God as anyone . . . more than most.

There was a time in Paul’s life when he would have:

1. thanked God (like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable) that he was not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers.
2. thanked God he was not a deluded, heretical, blaspheming Christian.
 - a. He was proud to hold the coats of those who stoned Stephen.
 - b. He was eager to persecute this new sect right out of existence.
 - c. He gloried in breathing out murderous threats against those who belonged to the way.
3. proudly prayed: “I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all I get. I vote the death penalty whenever Christians are brought to trial.”

Ah, but then he made that fateful trip to Damascus.

1. He saw a blinding light which threw him to the ground and broke his heart.
2. He spent three days grieving, repenting, remorseful.
3. And, for the first time in his life, Paul felt like a tax collector.
 - a. No good deeds to boast of.
 - b. No righteousness to trust in.
 - c. No one else to compare himself to and feel better than.
4. For the first time in his life, this man who had pounded his chest now beat his breast, and choked out, “God, be merciful . . . forgive me . . . I am a sinner.”

Paul knew, more than most of us, what it took to be right with God.

1. All the things he had once boasted in? Rubbish!
2. All that he had once been so proud of? Garbage!
3. All that had filled him with such confidence and self-congratulation? Dung!!
4. Paul knew, at last, that his relationship with God was founded on the unexplainable, unimaginable, amazing grace of a God who eagerly lifted up those who would humble themselves. “God, have mercy on me a sinner,” Paul had cried. And God did!

Move Six:

So, “No,” Paul never told the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. He only lived it! And, in reality, it was the only story he told . . . over and over again . . . in Corinth and Ephesus and Antioch and Galatia. Paul shouted the story of a God who forgave sinners whenever anyone would stand still enough to listen. It was the story of his life . . . and the life-story of every man and woman he chanced to meet.

You can read Paul’s version of the story in every one of his letters. You hear it whenever he talks about the cross of Christ. Every time he mentions “gospel”—the “good news”—you can hear the echoes of a story about a God who saves tax collectors. He tells the story to the Ephesians in chapter two, to the Philippians in chapter three, to the Colossians in chapter one. He tells it to Timothy and Titus and the Galatians and the Corinthians.

When it came time for Paul to learn about grace, I think he probably did what some of us ought to do. I imagine he decided to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen as Jesus told stories about sinful men and women and a gracious God.

Conclusion:

Over the next few weeks, we will be looking through the parables of Jesus to discover what he has to say about God’s grace.

1. We will see just how generously Jesus paints the grace of his Father in stories such as the Parable of the Prodigal Son.
2. We’ll study the story of the Wedding feast and think about a King who gives us clean clothes to wear.
3. We will look at the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard and consider the good-news/bad-news of a God who does not treat us fairly.
4. We will think about the story of the Moneylender and hear Jesus say that only those who have experienced the riches of grace can truly love God.
5. We’ll read the tale of the Unmerciful Servant and consider that if grace does not change us, it may well be revoked.
6. And, finally, we will revisit the Parable of the Talents to learn that a failure to grasp grace will cause you to bury yourself in the ground.

I am all for studying Paul to better understand grace. But Paul did not have the first word on grace—Jesus did. Before we skip over the gospels to get to grace, perhaps we should pause at the feet of our Lord and hear what he says on the subject. In these parables, Jesus lays out some simple, yet profound, lessons about the most important truth of our faith. Even when we are finished with this series, we will only have scratched the surface of grace. But it is a start. And, for that I am grateful.



Getting at Grace

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He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

Luke 18:10-14

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Jesus said a great deal about grace when he talked about his Father—though, again, he did not use the word “grace.” He spoke of a God who loves the world and wants everyone to be saved, opens the kingdom to tax-collectors and prostitutes, sends rain on the just and the unjust, and rejoices over one sinner who repents. Jesus said a mouthful about grace every time he talked about his Father.

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Study Guide

In the following weeks, we will be thinking about the subject of “grace.” Such a little word; such a gigantic idea. Grace has been much misunderstood and much abused. It forms the very foundation of our relationship with God, yet has often proven a stumbling block to people who do not understand its freedoms and responsibilities. “Stories of Grace” is a series in which we will explore the relationship between God’s grace and our own discipleship.

Monday

The first thing to recognize about “grace” is not that it is a theological concept, but that it is a trait of God’s character. Although grace can be defined as “unmerited favor,” it is first a description of God’s character. Read the following passages and note how central grace is to the personality of our God.

- Exodus 34:5-7.
What is the connection between “name” and “character”? [Think of Jacob (‘Deceiver’) and Peter (‘Rock’).] What does God’s name say about his nature? What evidence does God list to justify his name?
- Numbers 6:22-27.
Notice that putting God’s “name on the Israelites” results in an outpouring of grace.
- Jonah 4:1-3.
Jonah hates Ninevah. The Assyrians represent a great threat to Israel. What does Jonah know about his God that causes him so much anguish here?

Tuesday

Jesus understood grace not only as a basic ingredient of God’s character but as the basis of our relationship with Him. He knew we are saved by grace. Read the following words from the lips of Jesus.

- Read Matthew 18:12-14.
- Read Matthew 21:28-32.
- Read Mark 10:23-27.
- Read Luke 4:18-19.
- Read Luke 6:27-36. Taking your cue from vss 35-36 (that Jesus is encouraging God-like behavior in his disciples), reread this passage as a description of the way God acts.
- Read Luke 15:3-10.
- Read Luke 18:9-14.
- Read Luke 19:1-10.
- Read John 1:10-17.
- Read John 3:16-18.
- Read John 6:35-40.

Wednesday

Paul understood grace in a very personal way. Think about his life and the transformation he experienced as you read the following passages.

- Read Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2; 22:2-5; Php 3:4-6. It is not hard to see in these passages a list of “accomplishments” in which Paul took great pride before becoming a Christian.
- Read 1 Timothy 1:12-17. Perhaps the most poignant of Paul’s “confessions.” Notice the great need Paul felt for God’s grace.
- Read Galatians 1:13-17. Again, Paul credits the grace of God with his personal salvation.
- Read 1 Corinthians 15:7-10. Once again, Paul sees God’s grace as the central factor in his salvation.
- Nor does Paul limit his experience of grace to his conversion. He appreciates a continuing need for God’s grace in his life. Read Rom 7:14-25 and 2Cor 12:7-10.

Thursday

Given the role of grace in Paul’s own life, it is no wonder he should be the great champion of grace in the lives of all Christians. As you read the passages listed below, think through them from the perspective of how much your own salvation is dependent on a gracious God.

- Read Romans 3:21-24; 4:13-17; 5:1-2, 15-21. Notice that this grace came “freely,” as a “gift.” It “overflowed” to us. God made “abundant provision of grace.” It “increased all the more” to cover our great need.
- Read Ephesians 1:4-8; 2:1-9. Again, notice how “freely” this grace was given. Paul says God “lavished” it upon us. It is “rich” grace. It is the “gift of God.”
- Read 2 Timothy 1:8-10. Our salvation and sanctification are not the result of “anything we have done,” but wholly due to God’s own character.

Friday

Don’t for a moment think grace can be limited in our lives to the moment of salvation. It *is* by grace we are saved, but there is more to the story. Consider the ways God’s grace continues to be active in our Christian walk.

- Grace is constantly needed to cleanse us from our constant failings. Read 1 John 1:5-2:2; 3:19-20; and Romans 8:31-39. The same grace that allows us to find mercy at our conversion continues to ensure mercy for us as we live in this dark world.
- And grace is needed to provide us with the power to serve in God’s kingdom. Read Romans 12:1-8; Ephesians 2:8-10; 4:7-16.



Ok...What do I do now?

JB: Do you think God would strike me dead if I said that I didn't like one of the stories in the Bible?

Rosy: Of course not! No! He knows what we think anyway. He wants us to be honest with him just like we're honest with others. Why, what story don't you understand?

JB: I didn't say I don't understand it—I said I don't like it!

Rosy: Same difference, my sweet. For when you understand it, you'll also appreciate it.

JB: Well, whatever. It's this story about the Pharisee and the tax collector. If you ask me it undermines everything that religion is about. Now here's this very religious Pharisee. Obviously, he's a little arrogant, but he's doing what he is supposed to do. He prays, he fasts, he doesn't do any awful sins . . . good grief, he even gives 10 percent! And then there is this tax collector guy who clearly isn't doing what he's supposed to be doing. Obviously he isn't or he wouldn't be beating himself up like this. So you've got this good religious type who is doing everything he should and you've got this other guy who is messing up big time . . . and who gets his sins forgiven? Does this make sense to you? I mean, hey, why be religious if every old sinner can be forgiven?

Rosy: Interesting, but troubling, perspective, my innocent one. Though I certainly see now why this story doesn't much appeal to you. Might I ask you which one of these two characters you suppose Jesus expected us to identify with in this story?

JB: Well, see, that's just the thing. Obviously, we're supposed to identify with the tax collector. But we're not like the tax collector, are we? We're like the Pharisee—the good religious type trying his best to do what's right. Surely, I'm more deserving than the tax collector—or the 15 people who go to church here who are just like him!

Rosy: You're more deserving all right! But that's just the point, isn't it? Because of God's grace, we're not going to get what we deserve! Just like the tax collector didn't get what he deserved. Now don't stand so close, my guilty one, God might want to strike you dead after all!

Introducing JB and Rosy!

Normally this space will be filled with two personal growth resources. First, is a "To Do List"—practical suggestions for putting this week's lesson to work. Second, is a brief prayer: "Let the Spirit Help"—for only God can equip us to understand and practice grace-filled lives! However, this week we wanted to make an introduction.

Of course, you may not actually need an introduction to our favorite Christian couple—the often-struggling JB and his loving (if sharp-tongued) wife Rosy. They are probably people you already know. As a matter of fact, their creator says he knows a lot of couples in the church just like them. (Personally, I think he writes them from personal experience!)

And that's just the point, actually. JB and Rosy are just like we are: sometimes they understand . . . at times they get it right . . . but always they struggle. We present them here in the hope that their struggle for insight will illuminate your own journey. Perhaps they will remind you of some of your Christian friends. Better yet, maybe you'll recognize yourself. If you do, be assured that we think they're great folks . . . just like you!



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