



Week 4 – Grace not Reward

SETTING:

Before the group arrives prepare the room, with seats in the round and a central table. Soft lighting helps, and try to have everything you need in place before people arrive. Place two large plates on the table in the middle of the room. On one put a large bunch of red grapes. On the empty plate should be a handwritten card for each participant – in each card write “Name, God knows you, and loves you unconditionally. Also have a piece of paper, large if possible, with the word ‘GRACE’ written on it. Light the candle and arrange the other items for the Thank you and Goodnight.

As the group arrives play some music to go with the theme. For example: You don’t always get what you want (Rolling Stones), Love Changes Everything (Michael Ball). Feel free to choose other music that you think would fit the theme or set the right atmosphere.

WORSHIP AND WELCOME (15 mins):

Begin with these opening words followed by a moment of silence.

**All: God of the harvest, we have heard your call and we have come.
 We are in awe of your everlasting love.
 We are humbled by your belief in us.
 We are sorry for our reluctance and our apathy.
 We are ready to toil together in your vineyard, and to unveil your Kingdom on earth...
 That the last may be first and all may share in your feast of life.**

Read Psalm 139.1-12 together

Now encourage people to open their Windows on the Week (see course notes) and share those things for which they are thankful (gestures of kindness, gratitude for health, a moment of beauty). Ask them to consider which of them came as surprises or felt undeserved. Allow a moment of quiet after each to allow the group to reflect. After the group has shared and reflected, have a time of silence or open prayer followed by:

Leader: Almighty God,
 by whose grace alone we are accepted
 and called to your service:
 strengthen us by your Holy Spirit
 and make us worthy of our calling;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord,
 who is alive and reigns with you,
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 one God, now and for ever.

OR The Lord’s Prayer

Welcome everyone and thank them for coming.

OPEN QUESTION (10 mins):

Ask the group to share, either with the whole group or in pairs, the answer to this question:

What are you worth? (let them explore the lighter, fun answers to that at first, for example the value of a football player, the earnings of a TV presenter, the size of some pensions or owned homes. Some chemists estimate that the constituent elements of an adult human body can be bought over the counter for approximately £2.50!)

This is intended to engage people at a surface level and help them feel more comfortable. When they have had some time to do this ask them to consider how they might answer this on a deeper level:

What are you worth? (Consider the true value of life, uniqueness, gifts, experience, value to society and loved ones, our worth to God)

These can be shared openly, but use your discretion.

WORD PLAY (15 mins):

Invite two people to read Amazing Grace, a short sketch based upon two great parables of Jesus (Matthew 20:1-16 and Luke 14. 15-24) that both reveal intriguing facets of the Kingdom of God. The sketch can be found amongst the online resources.

After a moment of silent reflection ask this question: *What's so amazing about Grace?* Allow a little time for people to consider and share their responses and write them on a card on which GRACE is written large.

CONVERSATION (30 mins)

(Ask) What makes you feel worth something?

Much of our culture relies on giving reward as a proof of worth – loyalty cards, buy one get one free, ebay purchases called “wins”, pay raises, compliments. Many of us may find worth in being useful to others, doing things or seeking approval.

(Explain) Looking again at the group's words written around “Grace” it more than suggests that at the heart of the Christian faith is the message that we don't have to seek reward or do anything to have worth; we simply have to accept that we are loved by God.

There is nothing we can say or do to make God love us more or less. God has already taken the most loving initiative in Jesus living amongst us and going to the cross – everything we do can only be thank you for what God has already done and is already doing in our lives. This is grace.

“The (parable of the workers in the vineyard) focuses on an equation filled with amazing grace, which is resented by those who feel that they have earned their way to more” (Kenneth E. Bailey).

(Ask) In the parable of the workers in the vineyard do you still identify with the workers who resented the generous grace of the master? What might have you been thinking and feeling?

(Sum-up) It is easy for us to try to measure God's generosity against the world's standards and values but at the very heart of the Gospel, and the great parables of Jesus is one message – the Kingdom message – which affirms that when we accept and we are transformed by God's love for us, the values of the world are turned upside down. In the Kingdom of God, there are now inferiors, nor superiors. All are equally and unconditionally loved.

(Activity) Revisit Psalm 139: 1-12 and ask which verse leaps out to each person? God's knowledge of us is breath-taking. God's knows everything and loves us entirely.

(Activity) Ask one person to read Matthew 20: 20-28 aloud to the group and another to read Mark 10: 35-45.

(Ask) What's the difference between the two readings?

(Explain) In Mark's Gospel James and John request special places in the Kingdom. In Matthew, it is the *Mother* of James and John that makes the request. It appears that Mark's (earlier) account reflects what actually happened, but that by the time Matthew wrote his (later) account, James and John were pillars of the early church and so might be embarrassed of their faux pas and apparent misunderstanding of the Kingdom's values? Matthew's account of their *mother* asking for preferential treatment for her boys might have been added to save their blushes.

(Ask) If you were asked to explain Kingdom of God of God in one sentence, what would you say?

(Suggestions) There are no special places. Only unconditional, undeserved, unpredictable, extravagant love for all.

(Ask) In what ways does your church reflect this Kingdom model? In what ways does it not? Do we still struggle with claims for superiority and preferential treatment?

(Explain) The parable points not to our belief in God but God's belief in us. We don't receive what we deserve but what God graciously gives. We cannot earn or deserve more and that concept is very hard to swallow. Looking at life and faith through the prism of *reward* puts us at the centre (egocentric); *grace* puts God at the centre (theocentric).

“God's love is generous, extravagant, unpredictable, unconditional and totally undeserved...and THAT is the love that Jesus revealed and preached about replacing the Law. That is the love that took him to the cross, the love that he called us to share. One of the greatest challenges facing the church today is that we don't believe that God loves us as much as God loves us.”

(Martin John Nicholls)

(Response) As we hold silence let's ask ourselves in what ways we live life as a please to God, rather than as a thank you for what God has already done. How do we strive to enter God's good books and deserve our place at the Banquet rather than receive God's grace and respond in love and service?

(Silence)

THANK YOU and GOODNIGHT (10 mins):

Ask participants to reflect for a moment on what they've seen and heard, and then invite them to take an item from the table which represents their engagement during the session, and to hold it as they share their thoughts:

A candle for illumination – light a tea light from the central candle and hold it – it symbolises something new we have seen

Salt for faith in action – a pinch of salt from the central bowl – it represents a way in which we have been inspired to make a response in our own lives.

A peg for questions – take a peg and hold it – this stands of the reflections and questions we may want to 'peg up' for a while.

Bread - tear a piece from the loaf and hold it – it is a sign of how we have been fed and nourished by God's Word.

As each person holds their item as we offer this prayer

Leader: *As we hold these items we remember that Jesus lived his life amongst ordinary things and by his presence transformed them into the extra-ordinary.*

All: So may Christ, who is the Bread of life,
feed us by his words and example that we may be filled with the abundance of God's Kingdom.
May Jesus, who commands us to keep our saltiness,
inspire us to action so that we might be his hands and feet, reaching and walking for justice.
May Christ, who is the light of the world,
shine his light into our lives and contexts that we might see with his eyes and peer even into the darkest places.
May Jesus, who told stories without explanation and left questions hanging,
help us to hold our doubts and queries as we continue to follow him.
And may Christ, who reveals to us the very generous heart of God,
guide and sustain us until we meet again. Amen.

Allow everyone to replace their symbols on the table, except those holding bread. Pass piece of bread to everyone else in the group and in the silence prayerfully eat together.

Also pass round the plate so that each person can take their personal card, invite people to take them home and privately open them there.

Leader: Let us bless each other with the words of the grace.

All: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.
Amen.

Play some music as people say farewell and leave.