

Welcome and Reminders

Welcome to any visitors and welcome back to the group members. It is important to remember that everything said and done in this group is confidential. The expectation is that there will not be discussion about our conversations to anyone outside of the group that is represented here and now. We understand that sometimes personal insights or information may be shared by someone who feels comfortable doing so in this group and not around others. Let's be respectful of that and carry our commitment to confidentiality as we leave this group. *(Pass out the confidentiality reminder to anyone who has not yet received one).*

Prayer and Praises

Introduction

Paul instructs us, in Romans 15:7, to accept others as Christ accepted us. We as believers in the Divine intervention of Christ in this world are to literally imitate the unconditional acceptance Jesus without fail showed to every person he encountered.

- *How do you think the church, in general, is doing in showing acceptance?*

It would seem that the church accepts grace in theory today, but rarely upholds it in practice. The commission to share the 'good news' of Christ's salvation to all has been modified to sharing the 'good news' for Christ's individually selected and elite. The message of God has turned into an 'us vs them' battle of wits and judgement, while the world outside - those who desperately need to know the grace and love of God - crouch in the corner feeling abused by Scripture and rejected by the "representatives" of Christ.

Jesus told us, "By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35). By this standard, it would seem that the church has, for the most part, lost the credibility that would allow us to deliver the message of God's open acceptance to the world that so desperately needs it.

I'm not sure if this is comforting or frustrating, but this urgency and struggle for grace and acceptance is nothing new. Even in the time and ministry of Christ religion was thumbing its nose at grace-laced acceptance and imploring the church to build walls of select superiority. Luke 15 begins just this way, Jesus was teaching the crowds and had the nerve to allow the sinners to huddle around a listen. "This man," they said in obvious disgust, "welcomes sinners and eats with this." Jesus used this opportunity to show what acceptance really was.

Then Jesus told them this parable:

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So 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.

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

“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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

- Luke 15:3-32

God seeks value in you

The first thing I notice in this Jesus picture of acceptance is that we are valuable to God. Note, the Shepherd did not lose the one prized sheep, nor did the woman lose the silver dollar in a hand full of pennies. Any sheep, any coin, and of course, any son is just as valuable as the other. And I think Jesus messages in this context had a two-fold purpose. The first was to tell the Pharisees that there is value in each person. The second was to tell each person that they were valuable.

We cannot be messengers of acceptance until we learn that we ourselves are worthy of that acceptance. Consider this - Matthew 6:19 poignantly tells us that our earthly treasures will not be in heaven. From this we can assume that God doesn't really care about them. In fact, the thing God does care to spend eternity with, the treasures and valuables that God has chosen to hold on to is each of us. All the wealth of this world, all the treasures of the centuries have no meaning or worth to God - only you. You are the treasure, the great wealth God - and God, when you are lost, seeks you - actively pursues the value in you.

- *What are your thoughts about this? Do you feel valuable to God? Why or why not?*
- *Is it easier to see yourself as valuable or broken? (remember, there are no right or wrong answers - just discussion builders)*

Like the Pharisees in the time of Christ, today's church is often viewed as attack dogs on the hunt for their next meal. It is interesting that Peter tells us that it is the enemy prowling about, to and fro, looking for someone to devour. What an amazing contrast - the enemy seeking to harm and our God seeking to hold. The Pharisees seeking vengeance and Jesus seeking value.

It is important that we seek the mind of Christ even when viewing ourselves. If we cannot love ourselves, or see ourselves as worthy of God's acceptance, how can we possibly love outward and extend acceptance into the lives of others. It cannot happen through us until it happens to us.

God sees you as forgivable and forgiven

When the shepherd found the sheep he did not scold it. When the woman found the coin she did not hide it. When the father saw his son he did not chastise him. In each example provided by Jesus the protector, the owner, and the parent celebrated the return of their treasure.

It is easy to empathize with the prodigal son on his return trip - rehearsing the speech, expecting the worst, hoping - at best - for a demotion. He not only saw himself as unworthy, but he projected that sense of unworthiness onto his father. Who knows how many countless times he actually went through the speech on his way home, "I know, dad - uh, father - um sir! I know that I do not deserve to carry your name. I know that I made my bed and should lay in it. I know that these are the consequences that my actions have earned. I'm not asking you to take me back as your son - that would be too much considering the hurt I've caused you..." but before he could speak a word of his carefully scripted plea he felt the arms of his father surrounding him. His projections of worthlessness were destroyed by his father's aching love.

The father didn't even wait for the apology. He didn't have to weigh the consequences of his son's actions with his desire to accept. He forgave the son because there was no room for un-forgiveness in his heart. He forgave his son because unconditional love would accept nothing less.

- *Consider if there are any areas in your life that you are projecting worthlessness rather than receiving God's forgiveness. Share, if you feel comfortable doing so.*
- *Sometimes it is easier to hold onto your views of you as unworthy as opposed to allowing yourself to live in unearned forgiveness. Can you relate to this? If so, how?*
- *Is it possible to accept others, faults and all, when we cannot accept ourselves under the same conditions?*

Accept others as they are - not as they 'should' be

When we come to realize that we are valuable, forgivable and forgiven we can lay down our defensive judgements and accept the world as such. Philippians 2:12 encourages us to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. This means we need to seek God's calling and conviction in our life - seeking to understand how God wants us to live individually. But there is no indication that we should do the same for others. The indications, time and time again, are that we should love, accept, encourage, exhort, and pray for. "Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love." (Ephesians 4:2 New Living Translation).

Let us be the voice of God that shouts God's passionate love, let us be the arms of God that embrace the lost, let us be the heart of God that celebrates the return, and let us let the Holy Spirit be the leading of God that orchestrates transformation in the hearts and minds of others.

- *Discuss any thoughts you may have in response to this study.*