

“Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord!” In this form, or a close replica, all thirteen epistles nominally attributed to Paul open with these words, “Grace...from God...”

Grace. A word that is used so frequently by Paul and others in the Bible that you’d think we’d put more emphasis on it. Grace, a word with so many meanings and is so overlooked. Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary gives 14 definitions for the noun and 4 for the verbal form. The most common usage is as a noun. We use it to convey thanks (definition 10). We say *grace* before (or sometimes after) meals (definition 11); to describe an inherent excellence, fitted to win favor or confer pleasure or benefit (definition 6). If we are musically trained, *grace* notes are the ornamental notes that introduce a piece or surround the melody line (definition 12). And frequently, we use the word *grace* to talk about the prerogative of mercy, when someone is pardoned (definition 3). Definitions 1 and 2 are not readily in use, nor, are they talked about much these days.

Philip Yancey wrote a book about grace. It was seen by some as an indictment against the evangelical side of the Church. Yet, what I see in his book is a call for Christians to become both the receivers and dispensers of grace — *the exercise of love, kindness, mercy, favor*; the disposition to benefit or serve another, favor bestowed or privilege conferred and in the case of seeing grace through the lens of faith, the divine favor and mercy of God. In short, the first two definitions given by Webster’s Dictionary.

The Church talks about grace inside its walls. We have multiple examples of grace in our Bibles. As I said, every one of the letters attributed to Paul the Apostle begin with his greeting of grace. The question becomes, “How do we show such grace in our lives and to the world?” Bible dictionaries, along with Webster’s, note that the roots of our word, grace, come from the Latin word, *gratia*, which comes from the Greek, *χαρις*, whose meaning includes, gift. As Paul greets the church and his friends with the words, “Grace...from God...” he is offering God’s gift of divine favor to humanity and towards the world.

Serene Jones, the president of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, writes that, for her, grace is the “eternally present love” from which all life flows; that is to say, God. Dr. Jones says that God is a mysterious, creative, sustaining life force, a “real, persistent presence of divine love.” When we say God is grace, we are saying God is love. Dr. Jones pens that to be without grace is to be godless — in other words, *to not be awakened to the light of God’s love*.

This idea of grace and being godless reminds me of Isak Dinesen’s story, *Babette’s Feast*. It’s about a woman who arrives at a remote village that has attempted to renounce the world. The village leader was an austere Christian pastor whose sermons and governance removed the light from the villagers’ lives. Everyone wore black. The weekly church service was about the New Jerusalem of *Revelation*. Life on earth was to be, barely, tolerated as a means to getting there.

The leader had two daughters who were both dutiful to their father and exceptional in beauty (and unspoken grace).

On a dark and storm night, there came Babette, a refugee from a country mired in civil war. Having a letter of recommendation from a former suitor to one of the daughters, she was given grudging entrée into the life of the village.

One day, after twelve years serving the now deceased pastor and his two daughters, Babette receives a letter informing her of winning a lottery back in her home country. The daughters believe she will now leave after becoming a part of their lives. To honor the sister's effort to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of their late father's birth, Babette offers to make them and the villages a "real French dinner." They agree with considerable reservation.

The day of celebration arrives along with the former suitor of the other sister who is now a general in the country's army. As each course arrives, the general is delighted with the food and drink, while the villagers stoically consume what is placed before them. Gradually, the dinner worked a magical effect on the people of the village. They began to reminisce of the old days. A male member who had cheated another in a business deal confesses; two women who had feuded for years, reconciles. Laughter and joy begin to overflow.

At the end of the meal, the general gives a speech; followed by the villagers trooping out to the fountain to join hands and sing the old

songs of faith with renewed vigor. The sisters find Babette in the kitchen surrounded by the detritus of the meal: unwashed dishes, greasy pots, broken crates, the remains of turtle shell, vegetable trimmings, and empty bottles. The sisters finally remark on the dinner; how it will be remembered when Babette returns to her home in Paris. She tells them that she's not going back, and then, the bombshell — the money she won paid for the feast— every last penny went into feeding the village, and their guest, the general.

As for the general, his speech after the dinner sums up the point of Dinesen's parable:

*We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But, in our human foolishness and shortsightedness, we imagine grace to be finite.... But, the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it with gratitude.*

Not only can we wait to receive grace, we are called to extend grace. Stories like *Babette's Feast* illustrate our ability to accept grace-filled actions from others. Yet, it becomes harder for us to offer grace to others. Dr. Jones writes about how hard it was to extend grace to Timothy McVeigh for his bombing the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in which members of her family were injured. She also found it hard to be graceful to her mother with whom she had a very tumultuous relationship. It wasn't until her mother's death that Dr.

Jones was able to see God's grace surrounding her mother and come to accept it and extend it in the form of a confession written to her father and her sisters.

We see what Yancey calls "ungrace" all around us. The striving, backbiting, manipulating, holding of one's self and especially others to an unachievably high expectation brings "ungrace" to the forefront of our lives. Perhaps like the villagers in *Babette's Feast*, we lose the light of God's love even while we try so hard to do something, anything, everything, to earn grace. God and Jesus calls us to another way; one that, in faith, depends on the unmerited gift of God, the gift called grace.

Let us pray:

Grace-filling, grace-giving God, we thank you for the gift of Your all-encompassing love. We are grateful for this gift made visible in, through, and as Jesus the Christ; for the times when we receive grace from You and from others, and the times when we are able to offer grace in Your stead. By the power of the Holy Spirit, continue to pour out grace upon grace on us and on the world. Let Your love and grace shine into the darkness of our lives until we reflect all Your grace, goodness, mercy, justice, and love. Amen.