

The GRACE Question
Are you a teacher and still do not understand?
John 3:1-10

Well last week we had a very informative treat when Chosen People ministries came to show us Messiah in the Passover. This week I want to get back to our Questions of Lent series. Pastor Jerry started us off with The LIFE Question. Today we will answer The GRACE Question. Please turn to a very popular portion of Scripture, John 3:1-10. Let me give you a definition ... GRACE – is the unmerited favor of God, God giving us what we don't deserve. That could be taken two ways as most things can.

A married couple went to his high school reunion together. While there the husband noticed a lady alone at another table who obviously had too much to drink. The wife asked, "Do you know that lady?" Her husband answered, "Yes, she used to be my girlfriend. I understand that she hasn't stopped drinking since we broke up twenty years ago." "WOW!" said his wife, "Who would think a person could go on celebrating that long?" So, there are really two ways to look at most things.

A Christian acrostic for the word, GRACE is:
God's Reward At Christ's Expense.

Illustration: During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world were discussing whether any one belief was unique to the Christian faith. The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked, & heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among the world's religions. Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace." Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional. Do you remember the day you settled the GRACE question in your life?

If you turn in your Bibles to John's Gospel, chapter three and verses one through ten, we will read about a grace experience of a man named Nicodemus. I can especially relate to this guy's name, not just the Nic part either. When I was little we live upstairs from my Aunt Dot. She could have been a Nun, and she was the religious authority in our family. She used to call me Nicodemus all the time. I had no idea why. I thought it must have something to do with being bad, but I didn't think I was a bad kid. I never asked her about this. When I came to faith in Jesus Christ and began reading the Bible for myself, I came across this guy and he wasn't so bad after all.

READ – John 3:1-10

This is a very familiar passage of Scripture and full of rich teachings about the Christian faith. It also has been used erroneously, and has some negative connotations to it too. Let's take a closer look at what is going on here and how it applies to us.

Who is this guy Nicodemus? Our text tells us that he was a Pharisee, and he was a member of the Jewish ruling counsel. So what does that mean?

In this time there were Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were the ones who studied Scripture 24/7 and knew all the intricacies of the Law and the writings. They were consumed with making sure everything was ceremonially correct, and they would answer all the theological and tradition questions of the people. Their emphasis was on the spiritual aspects or more accurately the religious aspects of the Jewish community. The Sadducees were more politically oriented in society. They concerned themselves with the judicial aspects and how the Jewish community related in society. There were differences in the basic beliefs between these two groups. For example, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection, but the Sadducees did not. That's why they were Sad-U-See. Selected members of these two groups made up the Sanhedrin – the Jewish ruling counsel. Any conflicts, questions, judgments, or discrepancies pertaining to the Jewish Law would be heard and decided by this counsel.

In order for Nicodemus to be a part of this group, he would have to be recognized for his knowledge and status in the community. **Nicodemus had it all!** Check out this guy's pedigree. He was rich, intelligent, recognized by the whole community, confided in by the leaders, and part of the judging counsel of Israel. He had it all together and was a model Jew for all to admire. He had a heart for God and for the accuracy in keeping every detail of the Law. We all know people like this. Who wouldn't want their life and possessions? This is your boss, your co-worker, your neighbor, or some of the people you rub elbows with every day. I mean this guy was so religious he surely must know everything needed to have peace with God and fulfillment in life – right? So why is he coming to Jesus, a poor traveler from a no name town, looking for answers?

The Pharisees had a superiority attitude. They had seen many come and go claiming to be someone they weren't. The entire Jewish nation had been waiting for their Messiah to come. There had been prophetic silence for some 400 years until all this buzz about Jesus. The Pharisees were the ones who would be best to determine if anyone could really be the Messiah – they had all the knowledge of the Scriptures to test against. One of the criteria the Jews would use to test for the true Messiah would be signs. John writes his gospel with an emphasis on “signs” and the miraculous things Jesus did. Paul even tells us in black and white...

1 Cor 1:22- *Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ...*

The Pharisees would be the ones looking for these miraculous signs.

Let's look at how Nicodemus approached Jesus... The text tells us that he came to Him at night – one on one. He is polite and courteous in addressing Jesus even though he is of much higher stature. There does not appear to be an attitude or hostility as would be normal in a situation like this. We would expect Nic to be confronting Jesus and testing Him, but that doesn't seem to be the case. This religious leader, this expert in Scripture, addresses Jesus as “Rabbi” – Teacher – very respectful coming from a renowned teacher. He makes a very humble statement to Jesus. “We know you are a teacher who has come from God.” WOW! What an admission from this ruler of Israel. Something must have captured his attention about Jesus that would cause such recognition. He has come with an open mind and an emptiness inside that he desires to have filled.

With all that Nicodemus had and all that he had attained and gained, he was searching for something more. He was not looking for anything material either. He recognized his spiritual need; he needed something more than anything he had attained. Do you remember the two questions Pastor Jerry asked us to think about a couple of weeks ago?

**“If you get to where you are going, will you be where you want to be?” and ...
“If you find what you are looking for, what else will you need to make you happy?”**

This is kind of what Nicodemus was wrestling with. He was awakened to his own need of GRACE. Are you still searching for something? Maybe you are religious in form, or involved in the church and knowledgeable in the Bible or even a teacher or a leader, just like Nicodemus was. You know, you have a good reputation, you may even have a great job, you're involved in the church, you give generously in the offerings, you read the Bible, and do all the Christian things that people expect of a church-going Christian... but there's still something missing in your life. That feeling is God drawing you and making you aware of GRACE. This is the GRACE question.

Nic didn't get to pose a question to Jesus; he just acknowledged what he noticed. There were these miraculous signs that the Jews were looking for in the Messiah, and everywhere Jesus went, these signs followed Him –healing, deliverance, restorations, resurrection, and peace and joy. It was unmistakable – He must be the one. Jesus, as He usually did, knew the question of Nic's heart before he could verbalize it...

“How can I find what I'm looking for?” “What am I still missing?”

Jesus response seems to come out of left field, but remember that he already knows why Nic is there and what he came seeking to find. Jesus looked at the wealthy, intelligent, respected, religious leader, and saw the need of his heart. Jesus just tells him point blank in v. 3. **“Yo, Nic, all your work and study and knowledge and understanding and stature is great, but you're not even close, Dude. You will never experience what you need unless you have a spiritual rebirth.”** You must be born again – which would be more accurately translated – you must be born from above. There needs to be a transformation in your life that enables you to enter another world – the world of God and His Kingdom. In order to enter this world we had to be born into it. In order to enter the Heavenly world, God's world, we must be born into it.

Nicodemus' reply seems almost sarcastic. “How can a man be born when he's old” This would be an absurd question to ask Jesus, especially since he is an intelligent person. Was it rhetorical? Was it a way of showing how impossible Jesus' answer was? Could he have been saying with understanding, “Can a person whose ways and habits are so ingrained after all these years really change like that?” Just as impossible as it is for a person to be physically reborn, that's how impossible it sounds to consider a spiritual rebirth – a complete transformation of a life from the old ways and sin to a completely new way of forgiveness by the Grace of God.

If you accept His offer of free grace your sins are forgiven; your guilt is atoned for; your past is removed; your future is secure; you have peace in your heart; a song on your lips; you are saved from hell; you are right with God; you are going to Heaven...BUT...you must be born again – born from above. Is it possible for someone to really start over again even at 40, 50, 60, 70, or 80 years old? How can these things be – as Nic asked?

Illustration: John Newton was born in London to a godly mother & a father who did not serve the Lord. His mother died when he was six. Five years later he went to sea with his father who was a ship's captain. He became a midshipman & led a wild life, rejecting the God of his mother. He renounced any need of religion and lived a sinful life. Eventually he became a slave trader, crossing the ocean several times as captain of slave ship, responsible for terrible human degradation among the captives he had crowded on board. But grace was always a factor in his life. He survived a deadly fever in Africa, & his ship survived a terrible storm which almost killed him.

Finally, dissatisfied with his life, he began reading the writings of Thomas a Kempis. Somehow, the Holy Spirit began stirring inside his soul, awakening him to his need of grace and he gave his heart to Christ.

In an intense moment of inspiration, when he was thinking of the wonder of the grace of God which had him, he wrote the hymn, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound."

Then Jesus gives a very mysterious response... **"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."** What is he talking about here? Remember, John is writing a systematic gospel story here. He knows in what order he has put the events. This segment follows closely the story of John the Baptist and his message of repentance. As we have seen in our study of Revelation, John is not trying to confuse people. His writing is supposed to reveal God's message in ways the people can relate to and understand. So what is being taught here?

John preached a message of repentance of sin, a message of confession and being baptized in water to demonstrate this change of heart toward God. His mission was to point people to Jesus – the true One sent from God who would affect the forgiveness of sins and baptize believers with the Holy Spirit. So, what we have here is the answer to the GRACE question. Grace is God initiating an appeal to our hearts that we can sense as a deep need in our soul. God's desire and the required response is to recognize our need for forgiveness and then repent before God in confession and brokenness (born of water). This will be followed by the promise of God that Jesus blood would atone for our sin and we will receive the Holy Spirit who transforms our lives (born of the Spirit). Both are necessary for us to be truly born again or born from above.

This has nothing to do with what church we choose to attend, or any religious rituals or traditions. It has nothing to do with the Law of Moses or any other legalistic nonsense. This is simply establishing a life transforming relationship with Almighty God personally through Jesus Christ, and it is offered as a free gift to all who choose to believe. No one can choose for you. You can be born into this kind of faith through your family and their practices or beliefs. You must choose to be born from above and take that step yourself. What is the answer to the GRACE question?

It really is - **God's Reward At Christ's Expense.**

Most of us here have already experienced this and understand exactly with God's Grace is in our lives. We have the peace of God and the joy of knowing Him personally. However there may be one or two of you who have never heard the GRACE question answered so clearly before and God is stirring your heart even now. Well don't put it off any longer. Settle the Grace question in your heart right now. There's no magic prayer to pray or thing to do. If you feel the light has come on for you about all this because of what you heard today, simply acknowledge that before God in your own words.

If you have settled this issue for yourself already, you're not off the hook completely. We are not here to be all happy with ourselves because we have our spiritual life protected by the blood of Christ and we will not be condemned to eternal separation from God. The fellowship of believers is great and it's important and supported scripturally, but we have a job to do – a mission commanded by Jesus. We are to go into all the world and make disciples of all people, teaching them the things of God. Most of the people you see outside the doors of a church building have not answered the GRACE question in their lives yet. They are still searching for that one thing that is going to satisfy them completely and bring fulfillment and inner peace. We have the answer to the GRACE question for the people out there. How can we reach them; how can we tell them; how will they know of the gift God has for them? That's our mission, and it is to be to ALL people – every culture – every race – every one God has created on this earth.

Illustration: Billy Graham was once attending a dinner in his honor and found himself seated by an archbishop of a dominant religion in another country. During the evening he asked this man how he had become a Christian. This is his story:

He had already been installed as the archbishop in his country when he was invited to Chicago to give a lecture in a prominent theological school. One afternoon while sightseeing, he boarded a city bus. No sooner had he taken his seat when a big black finger tapped him on the shoulder. He turned to look into the full, round, ebony face of an obviously poor woman seated behind him. In a wonderfully rich voice, she asked, "Mister, has you ever been born again?" He frowned, thinking for sure he had misunderstood her question since English was his second language. With polite reserve he asked, "Excuse me?"

The deep, rolling voice repeated, "I says, has you been born again?" The archbishop stiffened his back, straightened his shoulders, and replied with the greatest dignity, "My dear madam, I am the archbishop of the church in my country I am here to give a lecture at the theological seminary."

As the bus rolled to a stop, the woman rose to get off. She looked at the proud, religious man dressed in his flowing robes bearing the insignia of his office and said bluntly, "Mister, that ain't what I asked you. I asked you, 'Has you been born again?'" Then she turned and walked off the bus and out of his life.

But, the archbishop said, her words rang in his ears and burned in his soul. He went back to his hotel room, located a Gideon Bible in a dresser drawer opened it to the Gospel of John, and read the familiar story of Nicodemus. With increasing clarity and conviction, he knew that even with all of his religious training, devotion, service, and recognition, he had never been born again. So he slipped down on his knees, and that night, in a Chicago hotel room thousands of miles from his home, God answered his heart's cry, and the GRACE question was settled forever.

Jesus asked Nicodemus, "**Are you a teacher and still do not understand?**" Our true spiritual condition has nothing to do with how much we know, or how many good things we do for others. We will be unfulfilled and lost until we answer the GRACE question once and for all, and the only answer is Jesus.