

## “Amazing, Annoying Grace” Luke 4:21-30

The Christian writer Philip Yancey has written over twenty books that have sold over 14 million copies worldwide. And one of his best known books is one called *What's So Amazing About Grace?*.

He is used to hearing from readers about his work. But he remembers one letter that he received a few years ago. The writer of the letter had enjoyed Yancey's book and had to let him know. He wanted to tell him just how much he appreciated the book called *What's So Annoying About Grace*.

Most likely, the mistake was just a typographical error. But although it had gotten the title of the book wrong, Yancey felt that it pointed out something very right about grace.<sup>1</sup>

The truth of the matter is that grace can be both amazing *and* annoying because of its very nature. And we can see that as we continue to read about how Jesus paid a visit to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth.

Last week, we heard about how Jesus spoke gracious words there. He read from the prophet Isaiah about good news. He spoke about freedom. He spoke about the Lord's favor. And then, he said that this was all taking place right there and then.

They found his message amazing. They were amazed by what he had to say. It all sounded good to them. Who could argue with good news? Who could not appreciate freedom? How could God's favor *not* be something to celebrate?

All of God's blessings would be delivered starting right now, Jesus said. All of God's promises were being fulfilled even as he spoke to them. Jesus proclaimed God's grace. And everyone could go along with that. Everyone was pleased with him.

Grace always sounds good to everyone in the abstract. No wonder they were so thrilled to hear about God's favor because they assumed that God would obviously favor them.

After all, Jesus was one of them, a hometown boy. He was Joseph's son. And they were glad that he had come back home to do all the things that he had done in other places. In fact, they probably expected him to do even greater things there in Nazareth.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://philipyancey.com/q-and-a-topics/grace>

It seems to me that they were sure that they were entitled to some special treatment because of their close relationship and history with Jesus. They had known him for a long, long time. And that would earn them some special privileges. Maybe, they felt like children who discover that a cousin owns a huge candy store or a video game company or a family who discovers that a long lost uncle just happens to be a billionaire.

Grace is amazing when we are the ones who receive it. The sound of it is oh so sweet when it saves *me*. God's favor is great when we can claim it for ourselves. How we love to sing about how Jesus loves *me* because the Bible tells me so.

A few years ago, after the September 11 attacks, the phrase *God Bless America* was everywhere. It was on bumper stickers. It was on signs at restaurants. Even Congress got in on the act as they stood on the steps of the Capitol and sang together--Democrats and Republicans--a chorus of the song *God Bless America*.<sup>2</sup> That may have been the last bipartisan thing our government was able to do.

Americans were hurting. We wanted to assure ourselves that God loves us and cares for us. We wanted and needed to claim God's blessings for ourselves. We wanted God to favor us. We wanted to claim God's grace.

My Lutheran friend, Ed Harper, has told me about seeing one of those signs, a large one posted somewhere that proclaimed in big, bold print *God Bless America*. And someone had come along and scrawled an addition underneath that message in smaller letters. "*And all the people of the world,*" they had written. I imagine that many people who saw it found it kind of annoying that someone would write graffiti like that on a sign like that.

In the synagogue that day, the crowd was ready, willing, and able to say with a loud voice *God Bless Nazareth*. But then, Jesus had to come along and add something that changed the whole picture. And we know for certain that many were annoyed by what he said.

Jesus reminded them that they could not claim God's blessing for themselves without also recognizing that God also blesses other. Jesus told them two stories from their own scriptures to illustrate what he meant.

During a great famine, the Lord had sent the prophet Elijah to feed not the people of Israel but a widow in the pagan city of Sidon. And Elijah had even raised this woman's son from the dead. And that pagan boy was the only person Elijah had ever raised.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://history.house.gov/HistoricalHighlight/Detail/36778>

And then, later, while the Israelites were at war with the Syrians, the Lord sent the prophet Elisha to heal someone from leprosy. Not one of Israel's soldiers but a leader of the Syrian army called Naaman.

Jesus pointed out the annoying side of God's amazing grace. It saves not just wretched sinners like me. It saves wretched sinners whom we don't really like. The Bible not only tells us that Jesus loves *me* but also that Jesus loves even our enemies.

They were annoyed by the fact that God's grace was extended to those whom they didn't like, those of whom they didn't approve, and those of whom they were afraid. Jesus' words were just a little too gracious for them. And maybe, they are too gracious for us too.

It's downright offensive to claim that God loves and favors people that don't deserve it. Grace is infuriating and positively annoying when it is given to all the wrong people.

I don't know how many of you used to read the comic strip *Kudzu* when it ran in the newspapers. It was the work of a native North Carolinian, Doug Marlette, who worked several years for the *Charlotte Observer*. And it was set in a fictional town called Bypass, North Carolina.

One of the main characters in the comic strip was the Reverend Will B. Dunn who was modeled on a real-life character, a Baptist preacher named Will Campbell. Campbell was from Mississippi and educated at Wake Forest College. And he was a character in just about every sense of the word.

He helped desegregate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas by escorting nine black students through angry mobs at the front door. He participated in sit-ins and demonstrations to claim civil rights for African-Americans.

He was the only white minister to attend the first meeting of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He did all of this because he believed in a God whose love and grace extended to all people, to black, to white, to everyone.

Yet his faith in God's love and his faith in the grace of Jesus Christ was really put to the test when one of his close friends was murdered. His friend had been registering black people to vote in Alabama when a sheriff's deputy came in and shot him in cold blood.

And in a remarkable passage from one of his books, Campbell wrote about how that incident had challenged his faith.

**He said: “The notion that a man could go to a store where a group of unarmed human beings are drinking soda pop and eating moon pies, fire a shotgun blast at one of them, tearing his lungs and heart and bowels from his body, turn on another and send lead pellets ripping through his flesh, and that God would set him free is almost more than I could stand.**

***But unless that is precisely the case, then there is no Gospel, there is no Good News. Unless that is the truth, we only have bad news.”***<sup>3</sup>

**There is that side to God’s grace that most of us would rather not think about. Even though that deputy sheriff had committed this horrible crime, this terrible sin, God wanted to share good news with him. God wanted to set him free. God loved him and wanted to bless him. God’s favor and God’s grace was for him just as much as for anyone else.**

**Just as he did with the people at Nazareth, Jesus confronts Christians like us with the uncomfortable truth of our own gospel. God so loves the world. And the world includes everybody.**

**God loves even the drunk drivers and the drug addicts. God loves even the murderers serving out their sentences on death row. God loves even the racists and the Klansmen. God loves even the terrorists. God loves even our enemies. God loves even those who want to be our enemies.**

**God loves those who wear the red hats that say *Make America Great Again* and support our current government. God loves those who march in the streets protesting against our current government. God loves Donald Trump. God loves Nancy Pelosi. God loves gay people just as much as anyone else. God loves Jews and Muslims and atheists just as much as Baptists or Presbyterians.**

**If God indeed loves the world, then God loves all of them. God’s grace and favor is for them. It’s really pretty annoying. It’s enough to fill our hearts with rage.**

**Let me be perfectly clear. God does not care for the awful, despicable, sinful things they may do, but he does care for them. Then again, God does not care for some of the awful, despicable, sinful things that we do.**

**God loves people who do not deserve to be loved. But the crowd at Nazareth forgot the same thing that we often forget. The pagans and the Syrians, their enemies and the people on the other side, had not done anything to earn God’s favor.**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://philipyancey.com/apostle-to-the-rednecks>

**But then again, neither had they. Neither have we. God doesn't love any of us because of what we have done or what we have not done. God freely offers us his grace even though none of us deserve it. That is what makes it so amazing. But it is also what makes it annoying.**

**God's grace is both. For our God's grace is sovereign. God's love is not under our control. God loves not because we are good, but because God himself is good.**

**God's love is not restricted to the church. God loves the world. God's favor is not just for people like us. God's favor is for all. The same grace that we receive here at the Lord's table is poured out upon every man, woman, and child in existence.**

**And even though we don't always like to hear it, even though it can make us mad, even though it may annoy us, that is good news.**

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**