

LESSON NINE: THE FACE OF GRACE

In his book titled, *What's So Amazing about Grace*, Philip writes: “*Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more*—no amount of spiritual calisthenics and renunciations, no amount of knowledge gained from seminaries and divinity schools, no amount of crusading in behalf of righteous causes. *And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less*—no amount of racism or pride or pornography or adultery or even murder. Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.”

—(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 70. God’s face is truly the face of grace.

PRAY: Gracious Father, look upon us with Your unflinching grace. You see all our evil, imperfections, and shortcomings. There is nothing we can do to gain Your favor. Help us to seek Your face as we cast ourselves upon Your throne of grace and beg for mercy. Hear us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

INTRODUCTION: Bob Olmstead of Reno, Nevada, tells of the experience of colleague Bill Welsh, a pastor in Desert Hot Springs, California. Members of Welsh’s congregation had a child who was subject to sudden seizures. These seizures were violent and painful, not only for the child but also for the parents and those who witnessed the child’s suffering.

The father and the child would come to church regularly and the father’s practice was to hold the child. One Sunday morning in the midst of worship, the child was seized [and] writhed painfully...The father lifted him caringly, carried him ...to the back of the sanctuary, where he stood still rocking the child tenderly, speaking to him gently until finally the seizure relented...There was no sign of embarrassment or frustration on the father’s face, only love for the hurting child. And then Welsh said, “In that moment, while I was preaching, I was preached to. I heard God speak to my heart and say, ‘That’s the way I love you through your imperfections. I’m not embarrassed to have people know that you are My child.’”

—Bob Olmstead, Reno, Nevada, 30 August, 1992.

BIBLE BASE: Ask a volunteer to read Luke 23:32-43. Ask the other participants to follow along in their own Bibles.

DISCUSS: (The following questions are for discussion. The answers are to help the leader guide the discussion. Participants may fill in the answers in the space provided.)

1. Why was Jesus crucified with two criminals?

It was necessary to fulfill the prophecy in this regard (see Isaiah 53:12). Jesus also made reference to this in Luke 22:37. No doubt Pontius Pilate intended the arrangement to be a slap in the face to the Jews who so badly wanted Jesus dead. He wanted the Jews to see what kind of a king they had brought to him.

2. Were the criminals nailed to the cross as Jesus was?

There is now substantial evidence to show that the Romans always used nails in crucifixion. Moreover, scourging was also commonly used in an effort to weaken the person to be crucified so that death would come sooner. Crucifixion may be the most gruesome way to kill that has ever been invented.

3. How did Jesus display His face of grace to the Roman soldiers?

He prayed for them. It is important to note that His prayer of forgiveness was said out loud. So often Christians have the notion that Jesus prayed silently. Since His prayer of forgiveness is recorded, people, including the executioners, had to hear it. How the soldiers reacted to Jesus’ prayer for them is not recorded. Nevertheless, the thought of the prayer is for them to be forgiven of all their sins, not just the sin of crucifying Jesus.

4. How did Jesus show grace while suffering?

He endured not only the pain of crucifixion, but also the mockery of the crowd. It appears that a goodly number of the Sanhedrin who had condemned Jesus to death were there. They were determined to see the end of Jesus with their own eyes. They were convinced Jesus was powerless to save Himself, because they believed He was merely a man.

5. Why did Pilate's inscription declare Jesus the King of the Jews?

The title proclaimed that Jesus was innocent of any crime. The inscription was intentional. In fact, the inscription was accurate. Not only is He the King of the Jews, He is also King of kings and Lord of lords.

6. Why did one of the criminals rebuke the other criminal?

Obviously he saw Jesus' face of grace. Perhaps it was the mercy Jesus showed the executioners when He forgave them. It may have been the way that Jesus bore all the mockery so graciously. In any event, he knew that Jesus was innocent. By stating that Jesus was innocent, he confessed his own sin.

7. What did the criminal mean when he asked Jesus to remember him when He comes in His Kingdom?

First, one must note the use of the verb come. The use of the word was messianic. Therefore, the criminal wanted to be remembered, not forgotten when Jesus comes in judgment. It was an appeal for forgiveness and salvation. Obviously, the faith of this criminal surpassed that of those who condemned Jesus. He truly saw the face of grace.

CHALLENGE: Develop a strategy for your group to invite people to come to your study that you would not ordinarily invite.

CLOSING THOUGHTS: With our hand clenched in a fist we cannot so much as pick up an orange or a boiled egg from the breakfast table. With a fist we cannot open a water faucet to wash the dishes or our face. Cooking and laundering cannot be done with hands closed in a fist. In terms of everyday human operations our fists are singularly ineffective. We use our open active hands to do almost everything that we do. The fist, so unpractical and ineffective, is a symbol of power. The world lives under the shadow of two huge fists, but its healing is in the open, nail-pierced hands of Christ.

Jesus reaches out to us with hands painfully open; He could not have been crucified with a clenched fist. Thus God is 'open,' not ideologically fixed. This God is not afraid of 'losing face.' This God waits patiently, ready to respond to human response...God rules over history but does not monopolize history. Here is suggested the painful openness of God. Our history is touched by the hands of Christ painfully open.

—Kosuke Koyama, "The Hand Painfully Open," *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, 22 (1987), 33 & 36.

CLOSING PRAYER: Lord God, keep us in Your grace. You have opened Your hands to receive us just as we are. Empower us to seek Your face always and use us as Your instruments to communicate Your grace to others. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.