Courageous Grace

Our recent travels took us to Palau—the newest territory in the North American Division. Pamela and I were impressed with the Adventist presence on that island. Many of the major businesses—hotels, restaurants, department and grocery stores, recreational facilities—are owned by members of the church. The former president of the country and several senators and representatives in congress are Seventh-day Adventists.

The large elementary school in Koror and the Palau Mission Academy both have a large enrollment of non-Adventist students from several of the islands nearby and from as far away as Japan. It is truly amazing and exciting to see how much Adventism has permeated the life of this small island in the Pacific.

It was on the island of Palau where the Adventist Church experienced one of the worst human tragedies. Almost ten years ago, just before Christmas, a nighttime intruder brutally attacked and killed Pastor Ruimar DePaiva, his wife Margaret, and their son. He also raped and nearly killed their ten-year-old daughter, Melissa.

The DePaivas were highly respected and widely known as loving, gracious people. In their honor, they were granted a state funeral that was held in the national gymnasium. During the service, the mother of Pastor DePaiva did something truly amazing. She took the microphone without warning or announcement and showed a level of forgiveness we should all strive to emulate.

She said that she had met with Justin, the man who murdered her son, daughter-in-law, and only grandson. She had prayed with him and told him that she’d already forgiven him. She said that he had cried when he heard that he was forgiven.

Then, having just learned that Justin’s mother was at the service, she asked Ms. Hirosi to join her. Unable to walk on her own, she was aided to the stage by her brother and several neighbors. Ruimar’s mom hugged her so warmly that the casual observer might have believed the two were long-lost friends. Together, they stepped to the microphone and Ms. DePaiva announced that they were “both mothers grieving for lost sons.”

She then implored the Palauan community to remove any shroud of blame that might otherwise cover Justin’s family. She declared that the DePaivas do not blame Justin’s family for the tragedy (and that no one else should either). “We raise our children,” she said. “We educate them, we teach them right from wrong. That is all that we, as mothers, can do.”

The only survivor, Melissa, was extraordinarily strong throughout this process. This left everyone in awe. In fact, when asked where she’d like to go to live, Melissa said: “I’d like to stay here in Palau.” Her grandmother then explained that staying on the island wasn’t possible, as her mother Margaret’s family was waiting for her in Dallas, desperately longing to hug and kiss and love her. “Okay,” Melissa said (again paraphrasing). “But I’ll be back someday; I’ll come back as a missionary.” She is now a student at Southern Adventist University.

Grace and forgiveness go hand-in-hand, and they are needed in the life of families, often on a daily basis. May this issue of Family Life remind us and inspire us to be more grace-full, and may that grace overflow abundantly into the lives of our loved ones.
Paradoxical Grace

It was early morning on the street corner where day laborers waited for work. They were ready to bend their backs, strain their muscles, and sweat hour after hour in the blazing summer heat.

It was the feel of that cold, hard penny pressed into the palm of their hands at day’s end that kept them going. A penny a day was all you could get for a full day’s work. No penny in your palm meant hardship at home.

Three hours into the day, more laborers joined the first crew on the job. Around noon and at 3:00 pm still more men arrived. One hour before quitting time, a few stragglers showed up and pitched in.

Then the whistle blew. The twelve-hour shift ended, and the men lined up for their pay.

That’s when the trouble started. The paymaster gave a full day’s wage to the men who had only worked one hour, and that made the others really mad. “Unfair! Unfair!” they yelled. “We worked eleven hours longer than they did! Give them less or give us more! We deserve more! We deserve more! We deserve more!”

That’s where their thinking got twisted. In the early hours of the morning they had hard-bargained for one whole penny in exchange for twelve hours of hard labor. And if that day had been like any other day, they would have been quite content that the penny they got was a fair wage.

In fact, on any other day they may have suspected ulterior motives on the part of the paymaster if he had given them more than they deserved. No self-respecting man wants a hand-out. He wants to earn what he gets. It’s a matter of pride to never accept charity.

But that was no ordinary day. Some got more than they deserved—a lot more than they deserved. And that sparked a toxic reaction. The first-hired were outraged. “These last workers have worked only one hour. Yet you’ve treated us all the same, even though we worked hard all day under a blazing sun.”

Look at me! I worked the longest and the hardest! I sweated more! I sacrificed more! I have more scars! I deserve the biggest paycheck!

You Can’t Earn, Or Deserve Grace.

These were Peter’s sentiments, and those of the other disciples. “We’ve given up everything to follow you. What will we get out of it?” To answer that question, Jesus told this parable.

First off, He assured them that everyone would be paid for their work. None would be cheated out of what they had earned. Arrive early or late. Work full time or part time, you’ll get your pay. “After all, the worker deserves to have his needs met.”

But the profound truth hidden in the heart of the story is about why some people got much more than they deserved. They got much more than they deserved; much more than they could possibly deserve. It wasn’t payment. It wasn’t compensation. It wasn’t reimbursement of expenses. It wasn’t remuneration. It wasn’t a quid pro quo agreement—If you’ll do this, I’ll do that. It was a free gift with no strings attached!

The 11/12ths that the 11th hour workers got was a gift, not wages. Not a bonus. Not a reward. Not a medal for exceptional service. Not an award for outstanding productivity. Not a recognition of superior attractiveness, or strength, or intelligence. Just a very generous gift.

Ah! But the problem is that some workers got the gift and others didn’t. That doesn’t seem fair. Why didn’t everyone get more than they earned, more than they deserved?

The key is that Jesus told this story to His disciples because they were manifesting the same mercenary attitude as the first-hired hirelings. Their jostling and jousting for position showed that they were in it for what they could get out of it. “An argument broke out among the disciples as to which one of them should be thought of as the greatest”

Jesus assured them that a self-promoting attitude prevents people from getting anything more than fair wages for their labor. Desperately desiring to be first disqualifies them from being first. Insisting that they are deserving of the special favors reserved only for the greatest among them clearly demonstrates that they are unworthy and undeserving.

The astonishing gift of grace is available to all, but it can only be received by those who aren’t working to earn it. The words “Well done, you good and faithful servant” will only be heard by those who least expect to hear them—by those who feel most undeserving of the commendation.

“We are not worthy of praise. We are...
Families under Grace

The witness of the New Testament is unequivocal: Grace has come among us through Jesus Christ. Grace is a radically new paradigm for understanding our relationship with God. It’s a completely different spiritual “operating system,” to borrow an information-technology term. It provides compelling inspiration, impetus, and freedom mingled with godly service, life-regulation and restraint in the experience of those who believe in Jesus Christ. This is nothing like the lackluster ways of doing religion where He is not the focus and center.

After his encounter with a gracious God on the Damascus road, much of Paul’s ministry was spent in retooling his own religious thinking, personal life, and ministry around the theme of God’s grace instead of legalism. The climax of his thought can be seen in Romans 6 and the astonishing assertion of verse 14: “For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.”

The Authentic Genetic Code of Christianity.

It is a high day indeed when grace is preached and becomes the recurring theme of a church’s worship. Yet, the practical application of grace into daily life and relationships seems all too gradual. Philip Yancey notes that societies touched by Christianity “still stretch toward grace” despite a secular drift. Many say grace before meals, are grateful for kindness, gratified by good news, and gracious in hosting friends. Something free of charge is gratis.

However, while the echo of grace may be in our language, grace has largely not found its way into our hearts. “The doctrine of grace and salvation through Jesus Christ is a mystery to a large share of those whose names are upon the church books.”

Grace is intended for home use. Of all arenas of human relationships, the need for grace is surely greatest in this most intimate setting. If families are to be winsome centers for discipleship and produce members that carry with them the authentic genetic code of Christianity, we must be about the business of bringing grace to the forefront in family ministry.

Note the close association of the marriage and family terms “covenant,” “adoption,” and “heirship” in Ellen White’s inspired comment: “We owe everything to grace, free grace, sovereign grace. Grace in the covenant ordained our adoption. Grace in the Saviour effected our redemption, our regeneration, and our adoption to heirship with Christ.”

What might it mean to be an “under grace” family? There is much to be garnered from Scripture. People marveled at “the words of grace” that came from Jesus’ mouth. In the parable of the lost son Jesus presents stirring lessons about parenting “under grace”—a long-suffering, forgiving, generous parent, a complete acceptance of an imperfect child not based on behavior (law), but on love. And in the episode of the woman taken in adultery, we see the grace of love, forgiveness, and restoration that can be so meaningful in marriage.

A concordance search of the word “grace” and its cognates yields an expansive vision of what relationships...
can be like where grace is in place. Some practical “doables” that emerge from a study like that include:

• Reflecting on grace in family worship, recounting Jesus’ parables of grace, singing songs about grace, and discussing applications of this concept to life at home.

• Practicing grace through gracious responses rather than shaming others for their mistakes or forgetfulness.

• Shaping relationships by grace instead of “laying down rules.” Point to the importance of boundaries in family relationships and how the behavior of each impacts the feelings of others in the home.

• Setting limits on work and taking time for rest; a performance-based value system runs counter to the principle of salvation by grace alone.

As family professionals, we can pass on to others only that which we have received ourselves. “Under grace” must be our own personal experience. I remember that, as a young pastor, it was not until I preached on the parable of the laborers in the vineyard\(^\text{11}\) that I came to realize more fully the meaning of grace.

My life had revolved almost completely around work and accomplishment. My mantra, passed on to me by my father and my grandfather, was “the best you can be will be none too good.” Even 24/7 work was not enough time to get it all done. By never really resting (especially not on Sabbath; I had pastor work!), I was denying the foundational principle of grace. How much better is the way of grace so clearly revealed in Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Matt. 11:28-30:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”\(^\text{12}\)

Ron Flowers is President of the Adventist Association of Family Life Professionals and, prior to his retirement, he and Karen Flowers directed the Department of Family Ministries, in the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do some commandment-observers squirm when they hear the words: “you are not under the law, but under grace”?

2. Why did the early morning laborers feel unfairly treated by the gracious and generous master?

References

1Luke 2:10, 11 NIV.
2Rom. 3:24; 5:2, 15; Eph. 1:6; 2:8.
3Rom. 11:6; 1 Cor. 15:10.
4Rom. 6:14.
6Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing about Grace? (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 12, 13.
7Ellen G. White, Ms. 27, 1889.
8Ellen G. White, God’s Amazing Grace. (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 2004), 54.
From Pigpen to Palace

In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) we find Jesus telling a compelling story to a group of Jewish families. He wanted to paint a dismal and most miserable picture of how far and how low sin can take a family member, and then illustrate one’s need to apply God’s grace in every situation.

The story is about a Jewish boy who insulted his father’s tradition by requesting his share of the inheritance. A few days later, having received his portion, he packed his things and left home. Basking in his newly acquired wealth, he squandered all his money, no doubt on women, wining, and dining. This behavior epitomizes the experience of many post-modern youths who find themselves in a similar situation.

As fate would have it, though, a famine arose in the land of his sojourn, and by that time he was broke. He went job hunting, but the only work he could find was a job feeding swine. Jesus told His listeners that this Jewish boy, who had grown up in a nice orthodox Jewish home, had a family tradition of avoiding all contact with unclean animals. So, what was he doing in a pigpen feeding swine?

This Jewish boy, who was raised in a kosher home, got so hungry that he wanted to eat the pig’s food! One can imagine how the Jewish crowd felt as they listened to the pathetic experience of this young man.

Jesus said that finally the boy became so distressed and broken that he came to his senses and decided to go back home to his father. At this stage, it is obvious that he is hungry, dirty, smelly, disheveled, and broke. The only thing he has left is his name and a rehearsed speech.

It’s so interesting to note that while the son was a long way off, the father saw him, ran to him, and with outstretched arms, embraced him, kissed him, dressed him like a king, and proceeded to throw a welcome-home party for him.

Clearly, this family saga evokes some provocative questions. How could the father embrace an ungrateful son like that? How could he wrap his royal robe around him? How could he grant forgiveness even before forgiveness was sought? Why should there be music and celebration over a pig-food-eating, womanizing, scandalizing, wayward son?

The answer! God’s amazing grace and the father’s abundant, unconditional love for his son.

Almost all of us have had family members who displayed character traits like this prodigal son; family members who have been rebellious, ungrateful, embarrassing, disloyal, unfaithful, untruthful, and much more. We have felt the loneliness, brokenness, pain, tears, disappointment, anger, and hurt.

Yet, like this father, we must love them, forgive them, and be willing to accept them back into our family. With outstretched arms we must receive them and embrace them, despite all their failings.

- It does not matter what their past has been.
- It does not matter the mistakes they have made.
- It does not matter how many times they have needed to be re-baptized.
- It does not matter whether they were a charming cheater, a frolicking fornicator, a dangerous drug dealer, or an addicted alcoholic.
- It does not matter whether they were a limping liar, a tantalizing thief, a greedy gambler, or a compulsive criminal.
- It does not matter whether they had an abortion, smoked dope, backslid, or backstabbed.

Once they genuinely reach out to us for help, we must provide reasonable and adequate help. Not help to sustain the behavior, but help to remedy the behavior. You must extend to them what we have received—God’s Amazing Grace!

- It should not be a question of what they have done, but a question of what God has done for you.
- It should not be a question of their unworthiness, but a question of God’s righteousness.
- It should not be a question of their sin, but a question of God’s grace.
- It should not be a question of their weakness, but a question of God’s strength.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6
When we remember how God has extended His grace toward us, how He removed our filthy rags and clothed us in His royal robe of righteousness, then we can extend that grace, as this father did, to any dysfunctional family member.

“I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For the proud will be humbled, but the humble will be honored.” The man who declared that he didn’t deserve grace got it. The man who bragged that he was the best and deserved the most, got nothing.

I can imagine the amazement of the last man hired that day when the paymaster brought him up to the front of the line. I can see his jaw drop in astonishment when that cold hard penny is pressed into his hand. I can hear him gasp and say, “There must be some mistake. I only worked one hour, I don’t deserve a full day’s wage.” And I can see the smile on the paymaster’s face as he says, “You’re so right! You don’t deserve the extra 11/12ths. It’s my gift to you. Go in peace.”

Peter Swanson teaches courses in Pastoral Care and Counseling at the Seminary at Andrews University, and is editor of Family Life. You may send comments to swansop@andrews.edu

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why is it so hard for well-educated, wealthy, attractive, accomplished persons to renounce the idea that they are worthy of the special favors of heaven?

2. If you can’t earn grace or deserve it, how do you get it?

References

1 Matthew 20:12 God’s Word Translation
2 Matthew 19:27 God’s Word Translation
3 Matthew 10:10 God’s Word Translation
4 White, Ellen G., Review & Herald, July 10, 1894, par. 3
6 Matthew 25:23 Good News Translation
7 Luke 17:10 New Living Translation
8 Luke 18:14 New Living Translation

Parsonage Perspective

When we remember how God has extended His grace toward us, how He removed our filthy rags and clothed us in His royal robe of righteousness, then we can extend that grace, as this father did, to any dysfunctional family member.

It’s significant that the father did not care about getting his robe dirty. He did not care about what his gossiping neighbors might think. He did not care about the embarrassment the boy had brought him. He did not care about the selfishness the boy demonstrated by leaving home. All he cared about was that his boy, who was once in the pigpen, had returned to the palace.

No doubt Jesus told this story to the Pharisees because He knew how self-righteous and condemning they were. It seems that Jesus wanted to reveal God’s amazing grace to the Pharisees, and to demonstrate the tremendous value He places on a backsliding sinner.

And today He is calling us to help to restore fallen individuals who are remorseful and who seek forgiveness. He is asking us to mirror His unconditional love for all people; and to be willing to reach out in love and show mercy and compassion to them.

Alanzo Smith is Director for Family Counseling, Men’s Ministry, Personal Ministry, and Sabbath School in the Greater New York Conference. June Smith is a professor at Long Island University.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What hinders us from extending extravagant grace to undeserving people?

2. How can Family Life Professionals most effectively intervene in families that desperately need to extend grace to each other, but don’t know how?
It was Mary and Joseph who provided the earthly parenting for God’s only Son. Jesus didn’t spring full grown to earth, rather, God intended Him to grow through the normal processes of human development. His earthly parents were entrusted with the responsibility of providing love, affirmation, discipline, and guidance.

The only documented scene from the childhood of Jesus, from the time of His birth until the beginning of His earthly ministry, is recorded by Luke in chapter 2:41-52.

We don’t know why Mary and Joseph left Jerusalem without Jesus. We can only imagine their relief when they returned the next day and found Him in the Temple. They heard him responding intelligently to the questions of the temple teachers, and were amazed at the conversation Jesus was having with those in authority.

There was a level of respect well-established between Jesus and His parents, so that when their questions reflected their anxiety, His response was not one of resentment but one of innocent surprise that what He had done should make them anxious. Responding to their concern, Jesus went home with them to Nazareth and continued to be obedient to them. Mary and Joseph truly demonstrated parenting by grace, even in their time of angst.

It seems clear that:

• Mary and Joseph took responsibility for guiding the Christ child
• They reached out respectfully to Him, and
• Jesus accepted their parental authority

“And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” No other verse in the Gospels describes the growth of the child Jesus so completely. It also spells out the task of Christian parenting. The four areas of growth—wisdom (mental and emotional growth), stature (physical growth), in favor with God (spiritual growth) and man (growth in personal relationship)—can be viewed as covering the entire scope of individual growth.

Offer Grace To Children In Every Day Ways

It is important that parents learn about what to expect as their children mature and develop.

• The order of development varies little from one child to another. For example, almost all children will sit before they stand and stand before they walk.
• The rate of development does vary greatly from one child to another. Within the range of normal development, some children will say first words several months earlier or several months later than other children.
• Development proceeds in stages, and each stage has characteristic traits.
• Development is cumulative. One stage builds on the previous stages. A good beginning in the preschool years lays a sound foundation for the elementary years and beyond.

A difficult beginning is more likely to result in complications in later stages. Children learn, not so much by what we say, but by what they see. Parents need to be clear about what they value in their lives and how those values show in their daily action. For example, parents who involve themselves and their families in ministry events demonstrate, in significant ways to their children, the meaning of their Christian faith. Parents who offer grace to their children in every day ways open their children’s hearts to understanding, and accepting the grace of God.

At times well-meaning parents may use misguided methods to do what they believe is best for their children.

I am reminded of a well-intentioned Christian father who often sacrificed his own comfort and needs to help someone else or to work for some higher goal. When problems came up he directed others to do what he did by saying, “Quit complaining! When you focus on a problem, you become a problem. Just do the right thing. It doesn’t matter whether you like it or not. The Kingdom of God is not a democracy.”

It wasn’t until his wife checked herself into a mental-health facility with symptoms of a physical and emotional collapse, and his children revealed that he made them feel like they were never going to be good enough, that he began to reexamine the way he was living his Christian life.

He realized he had been legalistic and harsh. He believed with all his heart that the Bible was true—but there was something missing in the way he had been taught to apply biblical principles. “I always thought I was...

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8
This father came to realize that denying problems perpetuates them and strains relationships. He learned that “fixing” his wife and children only led to disappointment and emotional distancing. He could not understand the hearts of his family members because he did not allow himself to submit to the discomfort of honest dialogue.

When this man accepted God’s grace and began offering it to his wife and children, he became free from the burden of pressuring, controlling, and manipulating them. Praise God!

The grace-filled elements of Christian parenting—love and affirmation, discipline and guidance—serve to help today’s children grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and the significant people in their lives.

Sue Murray is a spouse, a passionate mother, grandmother, and loyal friend. A retired Andrews University professor, her teaching focus was in the areas of Family Studies and Social Work.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What parenting dynamics are revealed when Mary—not Joseph—gives the mild reproof to Jesus for staying behind in Jerusalem instead of accompanying them on their homeward journey?

2. How can parents best extend grace to their children while disciplining them?

References

1. Luke 2:52, NASB.

When Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the temple at Jerusalem after the Passover feast, they reproved Him for staying behind instead of accompanying them on their homeward journey. They doubtless did so out of love for him and concern for his safety.

Though He did not accept the blame that Mary’s gentle reproof implied, Jesus obediently returned home with them to Nazareth, respectfully honored his earthly parents, and willingly performed his duties as a faithful son.