

# ***The Security (and Insecurities) of Grace***

Luke 18:9-14

Rodney Dangerfield (God rest his soul) made a career as a stand-up comic based largely on his self-deprecating humor. He wasn't unique, of course, but his patented red tie and "I get no respect" brand is what endeared him to a generation of audiences. Most of us can imagine him even now making characteristic quips like:

When I was a kid, I was so ugly, my mother had morning sickness after I was born!

I could tell my parents hated me. Instead of a rubber duck for a bath toy, they handed me a toaster.

Once when I was lost I saw a policeman and asked him to help me find my parents. I said to him, "Do you think we'll ever find them?" He replied, "I don't know, kid. There are so many places they can hide."

You get the idea. He was an Everyman who got no respect.

Self-deprecating humor works because it's okay to poke fun at yourself. When it's done in a clever way, it's not only amusing, but also demonstrates that people don't take themselves too seriously—that they're secure enough to absorb being the butt of a joke or two. Self-effacing individuals are endearing in many ways, and certainly preferable to all the egotistical ones who shamelessly promote their self-importance, value, or significance. Oddly, in a world that fixates on the Donald Trumps and Kim Kardashians of thin-skinned celebrity marketing, those who actually demonstrate more confidence about who they are, are those who don't need a image to hide behind, who aren't afraid to be their own critics and comics.

That's understandable. One of the lessons we learn in life is that bragging and self-promotion are gauche. Good manners and social etiquette demand less "ego" and more graciousness in polite company. Confident people are those who aren't fixated on themselves, but who are emotionally stable enough to have room in their lives for others.

Not only that, confident, secure people don't have a need to play the comparison game, measuring their own value and honor against that of others, positively or negatively. They know who they are and they are comfortable in their own skin, even if they make mistakes. Thus, they can afford to be modest about how they present themselves to others, because their self-worth isn't dependent on maintaining a certain image, or garnering praise and adoration, or being at the center of attention. That's why we enjoy being around them; they are people who are satisfied with who they are, enough so that every conversation isn't about them, or about others to whom they can compare themselves. They are gracious toward others because they don't have to prove their value and worth every time they utter a word.

Now you might think these would be fairly common traits—grace, modesty, personal security, sufficient self-esteem—but based on the level of graciousness we experience in daily life, it apparently isn't! If you haven't noticed, many folks just aren't that considerate and gracious! At times, I'm quite startled by the nastiness some people will display, especially when I would assume they'd know better. They'll be quick in their criticisms of others, severe in their judgments, and callously insensitive in their comments! You wonder,

where is this coming from? What's going on? What prompted this reaction? Why are they so crabby about this person or critical of that situation? Why do they immediately find fault, instead of offering something more constructive and complimentary?

It's hard to say; sometimes it's just the mood they are in at that particular moment—you catch them on a bad day. But then, as you get to know them, you may realize there's more to it than that. Something else is going on—a person's irritability says more about them than it does about those whom they're criticizing. That's not hard to discern. Nastiness comes from the well of anger, not one of satisfaction and contentment. Chronic criticism flows from a poisoned stream of unhappiness or from an inability or unwillingness to drink deeply from the waters of compassion and grace. In other words, somewhere deep within a spiteful person is the sense that love, and all the positive emotions that flow from it, is missing; that they are lacking essential ingredients to psychological comfort and security that shows up in their not being able to find contentment. They are harsh toward others because in some way, in some manner, they are angry and bitter about life.

Obviously, that doesn't explain every person or situation, but it covers more than we might realize. Those who lack graciousness toward others often struggle themselves to understand, appreciate, and embrace grace in a personal way. They are still grinding on something that creates friction within them—something that continues to annoy them and make them irritable. Perhaps they feel slighted by others or undervalued and unappreciated, or they may be stuck in a poisonous place, unwilling to forgive someone or move past

a source of bitterness that is toxic to their spirit. It comes out in being excessively and chronically critical of others, nasty in their comments, and predisposed toward negative judgments—a basic lack of graciousness. If there is humor, it's usually dispatched with barbs and implicit attacks. Their spirit doesn't harbor much grace for them or for others.

As I see it, this dearth of grace and graciousness is rooted in a fundamental insecurity over the purpose and value of who they are as a person. The struggle within them to find meaning, appreciation, and self-worth emerges in ways that try to bring others down to the level that they often subconsciously feel about themselves. If someone else receives praise, instead of acknowledging the good, there's a bit of jealousy that emerges. If a fault can be cited, it brings out a certain glee, even though it doesn't satisfy their own deep longing to be loved and appreciated for who they are. Unhappy people fix so much of their attention on how they fit or don't fit into people's lives; their sadness and bitterness robs them of contentment. It's a miserable state to be in, with perpetual complaints only masking a deep loss of self-respect and self-worth.

Those are the two faces of insecurity: it can lead some to egotistically exaggerate their self-worth, while others are mired in misery and chronic complaints. In whatever form it takes, insecurity is a common psycho-spiritual problem that impacts the quality of life for far more than we might realize. There are a lot of malcontents out there!

With this in mind, let's turn to the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector for all of this has bearing on it. In my view, this story

is not just about honor and shame in two men being reversed, or about the self-righteousness of one over and against the self-condemnation of the other. Instead, I think both characters in this parable display a struggle with a sense of who they are in life, which impacts their ability to grasp any measure of grace—something they both desperately needed.

The Pharisee, of course, is the one with the public reputation of honor and respect for his religious devotion. Yet, here he comes across in this story as lacking social grace in how he plays the comparison game, predictably doing it in two ways: being fixed upon himself and hyper-inflating his own goodness, while criticizing and judging the sins and faults of others. As I said earlier, this outlook and attitude typically says more about him and his own insecurities than anyone else—that he needs to verbalize his value, while faulting the poor character of others. Though I may be taking liberties with Jesus’ portrayal of the Pharisee, as a character, if he were spiritually secure and comfortable with who he was, this “righteous” man would be focused on anything but self-promotion. He wouldn’t need to prove himself if he were already confident in God’s love and in his own (and others’) estimation of who he was. If he were comfortable in his own skin, he wouldn’t have to justify his value, particularly in comparison to someone else. So self-righteousness may not be the only reason for this arrogant display of self-congratulation; I’d have to think it was because he didn’t really believe he was truly appreciated, valued, and loved for who he was and what he thought he represented, i.e., a classic example of emotional and spiritual insecurity.

On the other hand, the tax collector's insecurity is easier to recognize. To begin with, his place in society would be widely scorned given that he made his wealth in the corrupt practice of collecting taxes for the Romans—not the most honorable thing to do. Jesus' audience would take delight and affirm the Pharisees' judgment of him. But unlike his counterpart, the tax collector was wallowing in self-condemnation. Rather than cite his goodness, he was standing in judgment of his own sinfulness, unable to even look to God for mercy. We don't know exactly what prompted his self-condemnation, but that's not the point. Whatever the moral crime, whatever stung him for his sin, he now felt remorse and the heavy judgment of life and of God upon him. Because of that, Jesus turned the tables on his audience: instead of judging him harshly based on his reputation, Jesus recognized his need for grace as a flawed human being. Like Zacchaeus, this materially wealthy man was spiritually bankrupt and desperately needed something to change. At that moment, his remorse revealed his unhappiness to the core of his being.

So both of these characters were in need of grace, but we can assume only one of them appeared to realize it. Both of them sought something they could not grasp, i.e., divine love and acceptance, but only one would be in a position to recognize his need to receive it. The Pharisee, despite his self-delusions, was far worse off, because he wasn't at the point where he even recognized his need for mercy—he was living in denial of his spiritual state. Rather than face his insecurities, he chose to convince himself he was something special, living up to the standards of biblical righteousness, comparatively superior to everyone else. People who are like this often miss the

signs of their own deep longing for satisfaction and security—evident in his need for affirmation and self-absorption. The truth is, for the Pharisee, it was more about “self” than “righteousness.”

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to him at that moment, the tax man was actually better able to begin to embrace the grace that eluded him. Why? Because he understood more clearly what was lacking in his life; he recognized his acute poverty in spirit; no excuses were offered, no comparisons made to another. The irony of Jesus’ parable was, the shameful one who recognized his need for grace received it, whereas the “righteous” one who did not would miss the very love that would meet his deepest needs.

Anne Lamott writes: “I do not understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.” Grace, as an expression of God’s love, reorients us and helps us realize that value and self-worth come not in what we want to think we are, but in embracing who we truly are—in all of our human strengths and weaknesses, beauty and blemishes, honor and shame. Grace allows us to be honest with ourselves and realize the insecurities we feel and to embrace the hope that we are loved in spite of ourselves!

Grace offers us the chance to rebuild our lives on the quality of our relationships, not the quantity of our accomplishments. It leads us to accept our limitations and tether our self-worth, not to the control we have over others, but to the mutuality and interdependence we share with them and with God. Grace grants us perspective that we are all in this together and that to harm another in any way, only serves to hurt ourselves. Grace is a mystery—a

mercy from God—but an essential part of a spiritually abundant, confident, and secure life.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Swiss philosopher, Henri Amiel—a great moral thinker who was virtually unknown and certainly undervalued for his wisdom while he was living—wrote this:

Learn to...be what you are, and learn to resign with a good grace all that you are not. ...There is no respect for others without humility in one's self.

As I see it, this is a reasonable summation of this parable and of the modesty, confidence, and existential security we can experience when we trust God, trust others, and trust ourselves within a life of grace. We can relax, we can let go of the reins, we can embrace the good we see in ourselves and others and forgive the bad, so we can go forward believing in the goodness of God and in life itself. That's what grace affords us.

That is not only a gift from God, it is a mercy we all can live with.

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