

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“God’s Starting Point of Grace” (John 1:16-17)
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The prologue from John’s account of the gospel is one of the high water marks of scripture—beautifully written, theologically profound. John initially refers to Jesus Christ as the Word and hearkens back to Jesus’ role in creation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him no one thing came into being” (John 1:1-3a).

John then identifies two gifts God gives us in Jesus Christ, life and light: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:3b-5). This foreshadows what Jesus would declare later—“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life (John 8:12)...I am the resurrection and the life (John 11:25)...I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). In Jesus Christ God gives light to a world full of darkness and life to a world full of death.

Today I am preaching briefly on two other gifts God offers us in Jesus Christ: grace and truth—as John writes later in his prologue: “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:16-17). In Jesus Christ God gives grace to a world full of judgment and truth to a world full of lies.

Every single relationship in your life has one of two starting points: judgment or grace. Grace refers to what Paul Zahl writes in his amazing book *Grace in Practice* as “one-way-love” (36). Every person with whom you have a relationship will treat you from either a stance of judgment or grace, and likewise you will treat those same people from either a stance judgement or grace as well. This is true with every family member, every friend, every coworker, every neighbor, and yes every fellow Christian. Every thought and word and action towards one another has a starting point of judgment or grace.

Think about the relationships in your life. Which relationships in your family of origin have a starting point of grace—which ones a starting point of judgment? Was or is there one parent who gave you more grace than the other, one parent who was more judgmental than the other? How about with your siblings? Or how about your spouse or significant other—or former spouse or former significant other? Are or were those relationships based on one-way judgment or one-way love? You can ask yourself that same question with every relationship in your life...or if you want to get really uncomfortable, your relationship with yourself, which may sound like pop-psychiatry but it's biblical, for even Jesus commanded to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39).

Every single relationship based on judgment has one common denominator: expectations. You expect the other person to act or speak or treat you a certain way. You expect them to see things the way you do—culturally or politically or theologically, you name it. You expect them to compare favorably with others, or simply “be better” than others. In short, you expect that person to meet your expectations, whatever those may be. But the sobering truth is that, as you will hear in various 12-step therapy groups, expectations are premeditated resentments. A starting point of judgement is replete with expectations and will always lead to resentment, either one-way resentment or mutual resentment, which then leads to either a strained relationship or a broken relationship. To borrow from the title of Charles Dickens' masterpiece, “great expectations” will lead to great resentments. As a side note, as New Year's Eve is just around the corner—please beware of New Year's resolutions that you make for yourself, or others make for you—because such resolutions just might be masked expectations that will lead to resentment that can last the whole year through.

On the flipside, every single relationship based on grace has one common denominator: one-way love. Think about the relationships in your life that have a starting point of grace rather than judgment (I hope you have at least one relationship like this—if not, hang in there, the gospel is coming...). Relationships based on grace are free of expectations and therefore free of resentment. One-way love is just that, love that is one-way, love that is present and will always be present, love that is always freely given, love with no strings attached, love with no ulterior motives, love with no catch, love with no expectations and therefore no resentment. There is no judgement in grace, no judgment in one-way love.

A starting point of grace, rather than a starting point of judgement, can change every relationship in your life for the better, and even change your very life itself, as Paul Zahl writes:

It is true in life that grace, one-way love, has the power to turn despair into hope. It is almost always some form of grace, some outside source of unexpected and un hoped for compassion and kindness, that creates the change from discouragement and despair to endurance and perseverance. Grace as one-way love is thus the opposite of law. Law depresses and incites. Grace enlivens and enables. Grace is one-way love. Take an inventory of yourself. Watch other people about whose happiness you care. You will see it over and over: one-way love lifts up. One-way love cures. One-way love transforms. It is the change agent of life (37).

Back to John's prologue...“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” God's relationship with you, and your relationship with God, is not based on law, but on grace—that is the truth of the gospel. Every relationship you may have with other people may be based in judgement, but your relationship with God is not. When it comes to you, God chooses grace over law; God chooses one-way love over judgment.

In fact, when it comes to judgment, Jesus put it this way in his Sermon on the Mount, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” (Matthew 7:1). I think one of the reasons for this is because when it comes to judging others, we are almost always wrong (or at least I am). We misjudge others because we see them through our own distorted perspective and have no idea what their actual backstory is, no idea what their actual life is like.

But in Jesus Christ, scripture assures us that God has given us a High Priest who does not see us through our distorted perspective, but through God's perfect perspective of grace, God's perfect perspective of one-way love—a High Priest who indeed knows your backstory and knows what your actual life is like. In Jesus Christ “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

Not only that, but as John records later, Jesus stated, “The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22)—and further, as Jesus drew near his passion and death John records Jesus proclaiming, “Now is the judgment of this world...And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:31-32).

And on Good Friday God chose grace over law; on Good Friday God chose one-way love over judgment. That is why on Good Friday the One who preached, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” and stated, “the Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son” was “lifted up from the earth” on the cross. Jesus took the judgment of the world, including you, upon himself and prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

That is the definitive expression of God’s grace, God’s one-way love for you. That is the ultimate “outside source of unexpected and un hoped for compassion and kindness that creates the change from discouragement and despair to endurance and perseverance.” God’s one-way love lifts up. God’s one-way love cures. God’s one-way love transforms. That is how Jesus Christ brings light to a dark world, life to a dying world—that is how God brings light to the dark places in your heart and life to the places you may dead inside. There is not even a remote trace of resentment in God’s one-way love for you.

“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” God’s relationship with you always has and always will have a starting point of grace, a starting point of one-way love—that is the gospel.

And perhaps God may lead you to respond by having that same starting point in your relationships with other people...and perhaps even yourself.

Amen.