

Week 4 – The practice of grace - John 15: 1-9

As we grow up we have needs that are mostly met by our parents, at least initially. But some of us had one or both of our parents missing in our lives. Those that had the full set of parents won't have had all their needs met. And then even in the same family with the same parents and the same treatment you find one child able to feed and another unable to. Indeed being the complex individuals that we some of us come out of life with huge gaps and issues where our emotional needs weren't met, and others who have had similar if not identical experiences come out relatively unscathed.

A graphic of our emotional needs is available from the website resources page.

I find this interesting because where I have gaps two things occur

1. I am more hungry in those areas – hopefully that hunger and desire will be met by God's unlimited resources – the opposite (going elsewhere to get needs met) is idolatry as we explored last week).
2. I am less able to offer it to others – I need to work harder at it.

Last week we looked at the sinkholes in our lives and this relates to that. If you exhibit dysfunction that is a symptom of a soul lacking a centre, engage with it, question God, speak the words of Psalm 139 'Search me and know me God' and you will track it back to an unmet emotional need.

After the first introductory talk the general themes of the series so far have dealt with dysfunction of the soul. Weeks 4-6 now gear towards solutions – examining what the soul needs and how to bring health to your soul through regular daily actions.

Either using the gardening analogy of regular weeding and regular feeding, or the stream metaphor – the stream is your soul and you are its keeper.

This week it is grace – the soul needs grace.

If you look at the most complete human being who ever lived – look at his emotional balance, how he lived his life, how he related to others and stayed like that Psalm 1 tree planted by the stream – his soul wasn't maintained and healthy because he avoided bad stuff. He regularly faced difficulties, pressure, busyness, conflict, disappointment, human suffering and the extremes of ministry at the frontline.

So what can we learn from the way he lived, the way he stewarded his soul, that we can have some of what he has?

Let me introduce you to the cycle of grace:



There are four stages in the cycle of grace

- 1. Acceptance** For Jesus, acceptance and identity come before ministry and achievement. This is seen very clearly in the order that things happened to him. First there was nurture, care and attention in his childhood and adulthood, then before he embarked on his ministry – the purpose for his existence: his calling and destiny – he was baptised and had a very public affirmation from his father, with the HS in attendance – this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.

Your starting point for anything and everything comes with acceptance – you are God’s beloved. He loves you, and there’s nothing you can do that will make him love you less – nothing you can do can make him love you more. You receive God’s love as a gift and because you are so amazing. And that means that *there is no one you need to impress because you have already been accepted by God*. Who else’s approval or admiration can even get close to that?

- 2. Sustenance** And here we’re talking about spiritual sustenance.

What did Jesus do to feed his soul?

- He prayed and had time with his father, often getting up early to do so, or withdrawing to be on his own.
- Friendships – a close inner circle, then the 12, also Lazarus and his sisters, and his travelling companions.
- Corporate worship at the temple and synagogue.
- Scripture reading.
- Creation and walks
- Time with the kids and wider families
- Partying and hanging with bad dudes (he was called a glutton and a drunkard, friend of immoral people).

Many things we do in order to bring spiritual sustenance actually bring soul weariness. Partly it is because we have got in a muddle about what to do and why we do it. Change your mindset about ‘spiritual disciplines’ and start to come at it from the opposite direction. Not doing it in order to get acceptance (before God, others and yourself). All of it is optional, and drawn by our thirst for life and intimacy with the father.

Jesus gives us his peace, not as the world gives. In Jesus our souls find rest.

3. Significance

Jesus demonstrated his healthy sense of significance in his language:

John records the 7 ‘I am’ statements. He was constantly telling people who he was.

And he showed the same clarity and firmness of purpose when he mentored his disciples. It was always about who they were – not what they had to do. What we do flows out of who we are – if it is the other way round: finding identity – who I am – from what I achieve. Well then that leads to deep trouble, as we explored last week.

And this leads us to that concept of busy people and hurried hearts. Jesus was often busy, but never hurried. A hurried soul finds it hard to be present – it is distracted. It finds it hard to rest. Blaise Pascal said that ; ‘I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they are unable to stay quietly in their own room.’

And it finds itself lost in busyness.

The perfect antidote to this soul sickness is the gift of sabbath. Resting, stopping, setting time aside to be with God. Allowing the world to carry on turning without our direct involvement.

Jesus communicated to people that significance is a gift, not an achievement. A rested soul is the secret to what Jesus called the easy yoke.

4. Achievement

As we move into exercises to cultivate healthy souls, it is important that we do this in the right order. That our starting point is God's love for us: acceptance.

If we allow ourselves to embrace the fact that he loves us and chose us before the world began (acceptance) receive his love (sustenance), find our identity in him (significance) we can then move into achievement – we can start to work at who we become secure in the knowledge that it flows out of grace, not trying to earn his love and acceptance, not trying to achieve significance.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from the you can do nothing.” John 15:5

So Jesus talks about fruit, and he talks about doing. When you have a vision that grips you and a job to do then you get busy, you work incredibly hard, you make sacrifices, sometimes you can't stop until it is achieved – whether it is business, outreach, compassionate ministry. Also the Kingdom transforms our approach to work. Work for most of us is our primary ministry. It's what we spend most of our time doing, it's what we get paid for. And the bible teaches us to commit to it wholeheartedly and we pray that our blessing in that workplace brings kingdom transformation.

But Jesus' way is to work out of a place of rest in our souls. And we do that by learning to live intimately with Jesus from one moment to the next.

What we really have to learn is how to live in grace with God each moment. That's what it means to abide in the vine.

The disciples task, having hung around Jesus for a while and begun to participate in his calling, was to go to villages and share the gospel of the kingdom, demonstrating it with healing the sick and proclaiming the Kingdom has arrived.

They set off and came back absolutely full of it. I bet that they were then thinking about where to go next, what strategy to adopt and what title to give themselves. It's not like there wasn't the whole world to reach or anything.

So what was Jesus' response? He took them aside and had a bit of private quiet time with them.

Isn't that interesting? An unhurried approach even amidst great need, great achievement, great times. Think about this! 3 years of Jesus' ministry, then whatever follows. I would want to make the most of it! Stuff retreating and being still, taking rest, slowing down! Plenty of time to catch up on that when he goes.

But with Jesus, whether you are at your most productive or least productive, his approach is the same. And I suspect it will be the same in heaven too. The unforced rhythm of grace.

It is a mistake to assume that achievement is a direct result of effort. This isn't how the kingdom works. It doesn't mean I don't make an effort. Whether it be in work, in the disciplines of the spirit, in relationships,

in committing to church – ask anyone who is part of the team this morning – they will go home ever so slightly pooped, and their hard work is presented as an offering to God, part of their worship.

By when Jesus said: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matt 11: 28-30) he wasn’t saying follow me and put your feet up for the rest of your life. It is a different type of weary.

It is the sort of weary that comes from striving, worrying, living under the law and not abiding in the vine. Working for approval, searching for identity, fighting for acceptance and desperate for some sort of significance.

Jesus offers a whole new approach to life, one that will revive your soul and keep your stream pure, healthy and uncluttered.

Rest in the security of acceptance by God, adopted into his family: this is love, that he came to find us whilst we were still lost and in sin, sent his son to die for us that we might be redeemed. Loved unconditionally for who we are not what we do.

Learning to live in grace with God each moment. That’s what it means to abide in the vine. Letting the love of God sustain us moment by moment.

Knowing who we are in God and knowing our purpose on this earth, the primary one being to remain in Him; live loved. And letting God take care of the fruit part of things.

This is life: to place my soul every moment in the presence and care of God.