

The Front Door of Grace

[Matthew 7:24-27; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3, 16:21-23](#)

My Heart, Christ's Home

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

Sunday, March 7, 2004

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by doors. I have photographs of castle doors in England, thatch doors in Africa, brightly painted doors in Ireland, and ordinary doors here in America. I'm intrigued by doors, I suppose, because of the mystery they represent. What lies behind the doors we pass on our way home from work every evening? Is a family celebrating a birthday, or are the occupants barely speaking to each other? Is a newborn child nursing at its mother's breast, or is an aged grandfather slipping slowly toward death?

What lay behind the front door of the church at Corinth was not a pretty sight. There were no fewer than four factions jockeying for power in that church. One of the leaders was having sexual relations with his stepmother. Members were suing each other in the municipal courts. People were getting drunk at communion services. Some of the more gifted members were looking down their noses at the less gifted. A few were denying that Jesus had risen from the dead. If you think I'm overstating the case, read 1 Corinthians for yourself. If any congregation should have been drummed out of the corps it was this one.

Yet Paul opens his letter to this dysfunctional church with these warm and uplifting words: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Then, after taking them to task for their heretical beliefs and their fractious behavior, he closes the letter with much the same words: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you." It's as if the very walls of the church were made out of grace. In spite of their schisms and their sins, in spite of their immorality and their pride, in spite of their heresies and their abuses, the Corinthians were enfolded and embraced within "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ." In fact, Paul does the same thing in every letter he writes. No matter how flawed the congregation or how mixed up its members, Paul opens and closes every one of his letters with "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Which means that grace is the door, the only door, the single and solitary door, through which Christ enters our lives. He comes to us, not with laws we cannot possibly keep, or with judgment because we make a mess out of our lives. He comes with grace, and here are three phrases that define his grace.

The first is "unmerited favor." It's not our IQ, or our contributions to church and charity, or the trophies on our shelves, or the number of lines we earn in "Who's Who" that convince Christ to come knocking at our door. Our good deeds don't bring him running nor do our bad deeds turn him away. Jesus Christ walks through our front door solely because he genuinely wants to. It is only by his unmerited favor that our hearts can become Christ's home.

Nowhere is this more clearly stated than in Ephesians 2:8-9 -- "By grace you have been saved through faith; and this in not your own doing, it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Christ's favor is entirely unmerited, which means that no matter how bad your record or how flawed your character, Christ wants to make your heart his home.

Secondly, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is "unsparing sacrifice." Grace Aposian taught me about unsparing sacrifice back in 1953. During spring break that year, our college choir went on tour through northern California and southern Oregon. Most of the choir members rode day after day in an old second-hand school bus. The seats were cracked, the shock absorbers worn out, the engine labored over hills at about thirty-five miles an hour. I, on the other hand, drove a new air conditioned Buick station wagon, pulling a trailer full of robes and risers. Of course, I didn't drive alone. Every morning choir members drew numbers out of a hat for one of the five remaining seats in the wagon. Now it happened that I had just begun dating a redhead alto named Carol McClane, but she was never one of the fortunate five. Our mutual friend Grace Aposian, however, had a lucky hand. Every day, without fail, Grace came up with one of the lucky numbers, and every day Grace gave the winning ticket to Carol. Every day, Grace unsparingly sacrificed air conditioned comfort so Carol could ride in the Buick, and I assure you she didn't ride in the back seat! By the end of that week, Carol and I were well on our way toward our nearly fifty-year journey as husband and wife.

Now, let's admit it. My great charm had something to do with winning Carol, but my triumph might not have been so rapid had it not been for the unsparing grace of Grace Aposian. She didn't have to give up her seat in the station wagon. No one demanded or even asked her to sacrifice that smooth ride and air conditional comfort. Yet, true to her name, Grace unsparingly gave it up for Carol and me. And that's only a faint reflection, a very faint reflection, of what Jesus Christ did for us when, according to Philippians 2:7-8, he "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Death on a cross: that's the unsparing sacrifice of our gracious Savior.

Thirdly, grace is "unlimited love." Somewhere, early in my Christian life, I picked up the notion that if I didn't achieve moral and spiritual perfection (or something close to it) Jesus would walk out on me and slam the door behind him. And then I discovered Paul's reassuring word in 2 Timothy 2:13: "If we are faithless, he remains faithful -- for he cannot deny himself." I memorized that verse because I need it every day. My faith is sometimes so weak! But even when I am faith-less, "he remains faithful -- for he cannot deny himself." That means that our loving Savior will stick with us no matter how often we walk out on him. Our Savior's love is unlimited.

In his poem "The Hound of Heaven," Francis Thompson likens our Savior to a hound who will not give up the chase until he corners us and convinces us that he alone is the source of the love and security we seek. Here are some excerpts:

I fled him down the nights and down the days I fled him down the arches of the years. I fled him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind, and in the midst of tears I hid from him, and under running laughter.

Still with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace, Deliberate speed, majestic instancy Came on the following Feet And a voice above them beat, "Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me."

And near the end of the poem Thompson puts these words on our Savior's lips:

"Thou knowest not how little worthy of love thou art! Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee Save Me, save only Me?

Rise, clasp My hand, and come."

Our Savior's love is unlimited. He will seek you down all the nights and days. He will seek you down the arches of the years, until you clasp his hand, and come home to God.

A friend in Los Angeles supplied one of the finest one-line definitions of grace I've ever heard. I must have been feeling pretty low that day, down on myself for some real or imagined sin. In any case, here's what John told me: "Tom, God loves you and you can't do anything about it." You can't earn it, you can't pay for it, you will never deserve it. Yet God loves you, and you can't do anything about it. Well, there is one thing you can do about it. When our gracious Savior knocks, open the door and let your heart be Christ's home.