

NOT NEGOTIABLE: Worship

We're talking about the not negotiables of being a Christian. A not negotiable is an attitude, an action, a life practice that followers of Jesus include in their lives without debate or discussion.

In the opening weeks of the series we described having a mission or purpose as a not negotiable. We can't walk away from the manger in Bethlehem or the empty tomb in Jerusalem without having a sense of mission and purpose to our faith lives. We are to tell the world about Jesus, to make disciples of all nations, to teach and serve in his name. We are to love God and love our neighbor - to leave our little piece of the world better than how we found it. That much, too, is not negotiable.

And last week we talked about what we do in this room on Sundays. Here we worship, we praise God, we gather as people of God, as the Body of Christ to speak and sing our praise. Worship is a not negotiable for followers of Jesus. We concoct all kinds of excuses for not doing so, of course, but it's not negotiable. We are to live a life of praise and thanksgiving to God. Our objections are noted but overruled.

Today our focus is on grace. One of my favorite words in the Christian vocabulary, grace means good you don't deserve. A fantastic example of grace that you sports fans might remember from eight years ago. A Detroit Tigers pitcher named Armando Gallaraga reached the top of the ninth inning with a perfect game - no base runners allowed in the first eight innings. He retired the first two men in the ninth, and then a batter hit a slow roller wide of first base. The first baseman fielded the ball cleanly and threw to the Gallarago who was covering first. Sadly, the runner beat the throw, ruled the umpire, Jim Joyce. Runner safe. End of perfect game. Even sadder, video replays of the play showed clearly that the runner had not beat the throw and in fact was out. But since that play happened when baseball didn't use video replays to challenge umpire calls, there was nothing Gallaraga could do. His perfect game was lost.

The next day, the same two teams and the same umpires met for the next game in their series. Before the game, the teams exchanged lineups with each other and with the home plate umpire. Usually it's the manager who does that job. But for that game, Gallaraga carried the lineup to home plate, specifically to be able to speak to the umpire who had stolen a perfect game from him. But Gallaraga didn't go to yell at Joyce, to call him names, or to remind him of his mistake. He went to assure him that he had forgiven him, that all was well between the two of them. That was an act of grace. It was good the umpire didn't deserve.

As followers of Jesus, grace is a not negotiable that has at least two components. The first component is our acknowledgment that we need it. Step 1: Admit we need grace. Make it personal. Step 1, I acknowledge that I need it. You do, too, but I can't speak for you, so I'll only say I know I need it.

Remember what Peter said when he got back to shore, his fishing boat loaded to almost sinking with the fish Jesus helped him and his buddies catch? (Lk 5.8)... Jesus, I don't deserve this grand haul! I don't deserve this great reward.

Or the Apostle Paul's confession about his place in ministry. Listen to how he tells of the resurrected Jesus' appearance to him on the road to Damascus (1 Cor 15.8-9)... I persecuted his followers. I tried to damage his church. Yet Jesus decided to appear to me, decided to use me. That was grace, that was good I didn't deserve.

Confession is good for the soul, says the old adage - confession of our need for grace is a not negotiable.

What's that confession sound like? I hope you've been there: I make so many mistakes, God. I let you down in so many ways. I turn away from your church. I turn away from your Word. I live according to my own rules, not yours. I am so completely, perfectly imperfect. I can't possibly stand in your presence. I can't possibly deserve your attention. You are so holy and I am so...not.

Such a confession is honest and accurate. Such a confession opens us to the healing power of grace. Such a confession is not negotiable for those who follow Jesus.

Confessing our need for grace is one component, living as a source of grace is another. The Tigers pitcher Gallaraga was a source of grace. The umpire had not earned, he did not deserve, the goodness shown in that lineup card exchange at home plate. Gallarraga gave it anyway.

The driver who cuts in front of you in traffic, nearly taking off the front quarter of your car, probably didn't mean to come that close, and probably didn't do it to hurt you or harm your vehicle. That driver was careless and should have paid more attention to his surroundings, but he didn't mean it. And you've probably done the same thing at some point in your life. So stop with the beat down. And show some grace.

Your grandchild probably didn't drop the glass on the floor to give you more work, probably didn't mean to create the hazard of tiny glass pieces on the floor. And you've probably dropped a glass or two yourself over the years of your life. So stop the uproar, and show some grace.

But don't get the sequence wrong here. Grace is always first personal. My need for grace is my own. You have nothing to do with my imperfection. You have to endure it. You suffer as a result of it. But you are not the cause of my imperfection. I am. And so my need for, my confession of my need for grace is personal - intimately personal.

As is my gift of grace to others. It is because I have received grace that I give it away. It is because God sent Jesus to save my magnificently imperfect soul that I give grace away. It is because God overlooks my failures, God opens the doors of heaven to me, that I open the doors of grace to you. You don't deserve my grace - it wouldn't be grace if you deserved it - you didn't earn my grace. It's because I have been pulled off the ash heap of human history that I am alive and in this position this morning. And you can make the same confession, if you're honest. Grace is first and foremost personal.

Grace is not an indicator of how nice we are, what generous and gentle people we are, or how we contribute to others' quality of life. The grace we give to others is a measurement of how completely changed we have been by God's grace in our own lives.

Grace is not negotiable because unless we experience God's grace, we can never be free, we can never have authentic confidence in ourselves, and hope about our eternal destinies is well out of reach. Grace is not negotiable because unless we give grace to each other - unless we let each other up, unless we refuse to judge, refuse to hold mistakes against each other - we will never show evidence that we have in fact found our own salvation in the person and thanks to the grace of God offered in Jesus Christ.

As followers of Jesus, we don't get to decide whether we need or whether we give grace; trust me, you do. Our need for grace is great. Our calling to give grace is irrevocable.

Grace is not negotiable.