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# INTRODUCTION

*The courage to be is the courage to accept oneself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable.*

Paul Tillich

Welcome to the *One Way Love Discussion Guide*!

For each session, gather as a group in a comfortable space and begin with prayer. Thank God for unconditional grace to an undeserving world. Consider as you listen, and share how God might be leading you to truly understand and experience grace and in turn be a conduit for that grace in your family, community, and relationships.

# ROLLER COASTER OF GRACE

*We live in a world, a culture, of two-way love.*

But the gospel reverses the way the world works. The first are last, the last are first, the sinners are forgiven and the pious are humbled. Read this passage together and reflect upon the radical message that Jesus brings to earth: Matthew 11:25–30.

Jesus thanks God for reversing everything.

*When you read verse 25, do you relate more to the intelligent or the infant? Why is this good news?*

Then Jesus identifies Himself as the Son of God and turns from prayer to invitation.

*What is Jesus's invitation? What is the light burden that He invites people to undertake? Why is this good news?*

*The foundation of the Christian faith is grace—God's one-way love for us.*

*Have you always felt that this was the foundation of the faith? Have you ever been somewhere where the foundation seemed to be something different?*

Grace works without requiring anything on our part.

*Is this your understanding of grace?*

*Does it really not require anything? A decision, a confession, repentance? Anything at all?*

Grace is unconditional acceptance given to an undeserving person by an unobligated giver.

*In what ways are we undeserving of grace?*

*Are there ways in which we attempt to deserve it? Or attempt to determine who can and cannot have grace?*

Jesus came to liberate us from the weight of having to make it on our own. From the demand to measure up. He came to emancipate us from the burden to get it all right.

*Do you often feel the weight of having to make it on your own?*

*What would it mean to be free from that weight?*

*What happens if we don't get it all right?*

From the obligation to fix ourselves and others.

*Do you know people who feel this obligation to fix others? Do we find them more in society or in the church?*

*Jesus came to set us free from the enslaving need to be right and rewarded and regarded and respected.*

*What are the things you do to fulfill your need to be right?*

*To be rewarded?*

*To be regarded?*

*To be respected?*

*You're free to be weak.*

*Do you feel freedom to be weak in society? In church? In your family? Why or why not?*

*The gospel of Jesus Christ enables us to revel in our expendability.*

*Is this the gospel as you've always understood it?*

*What would it mean for you to take this seriously?*

*There are no strings attached. No qualifiers. No conditions.*

Robert Farrar Capon says it this way: "Whatever you do, do not preach grace.... We insist on being reckoned with. Give us something, anything; but spare us the indignity of this indiscriminate acceptance."

*Why do you think we want some control over our fate?*

# TWO-WAY LOVE

*If we do the right things in the right way with the right heart, we can have life.*

*If we're good, God will love us and accept us.*

This makes sense, right?

Call it what you will—karma or consequences. Garbage in, garbage out. The Law of Attraction. Even Christianity is not free from this sense of conditionality. The sermons that preach a happy marriage and a good life as a result of “doing things God’s way.” The books that promise everything from stress-free living to salvation as a result of following simple steps. Think of all the things that the church says God will do *if only we do something first*. Restore our country. Pour out His blessings. Protect us. Bless us.

We use phrases like God “putting us through things” or God “getting our attention.”

*Does God put us through things?*

*Does God need our attention?*

*Do we need to do anything to earn God’s love or acceptance?*

*Does God need to make us do anything to be loved or accepted?*

*Conditionality makes us feel safe.*

Sure, there may be things in this world that happen as a result of other things.

There may be good advice on how to have a happy marriage.

But will God grant those things only when we do the right thing?

Only if we live up to an ideal?

Or maybe God just wants us to strive for the ideal—we don’t have to be perfect.

But then how much striving is enough?

*When “do this and live” is drowned out by “it is finished,” then and only then will we be set free.*

*What does this mean to you?*

*What exactly does “finished” mean in this context?*

*Our life circumstances?*

*Our character?*

*Our salvation?*

Often Christianity makes a distinction between our salvation after death and experiencing eternal life here and now.

Grace, it is said, is about where we go when we die.

But for the here and now, we have to live a certain way and be a certain thing.

*Is that what we see in Scripture?*

*Is it possible that there is no biblical distinction between grace for eternity and grace for right now?*

*Are we loved, saved, accepted right now?*

*This amazing word of relief can be offensive to us.*

Perhaps the offense of this gospel isn't really apparent at first. We accept God's grace and welcome it into our lives, even as we fail to fully grasp it. Because deep down, we think that we're still pretty good people, and so it's not that hard for God to extend us grace.

But the real offense comes when we try to extend grace to others. It is then we discover that what God has done for others, we struggle to do.

Is there someone you just cannot extend grace to?

God has.

Now what?

*Dr. Doug Kelly said, "If you want to make people mad, preach law. If you want to make people really mad, preach grace."*

In Luke 15, Jesus is surrounded by "tax collectors and sinners." This could be the perfect environment for a fiery sermon of hellfire and repentance, but take a moment and read what Jesus preaches to this crowd in Luke 15:1–7.

*What is this parable about?*

*What is the significance of this parable for the tax collectors and sinners?*

*What does it mean to "go after" the one who was lost?*

*What does that look like?*

*What does it look like when people do this without grace? And with grace?*

*Look at the behavior of the shepherd when he finds the lost sheep.*

*What does he do?*

*What does this mean for us?*

*At no point in the parable does the shepherd scold, teach, or punish the errant sheep. Sheep are not easily trained. Sheep are lost, found, and returned to the fold. Does this have significance for the way we show grace?*

*If there's something we hate more than being told what to do, it's being told that we can't do anything.*

You can't do anything.

No one can do anything.

And so that person you are having trouble extending grace to? If you think, *If only they would apologize, or fix things, or see their problem*—that's not grace. That's normal conditionality. You can't forgive someone's debt once they pay it off. You can't even forgive someone's debt if someone else pays it off for them. The only way to forgive a debt is to honestly, truly, completely wipe it from your memory without any kind of payment, partial or complete.

*Does God require anything to forgive us?*

*Should we require anything to forgive others?*

*This means that the part of you that gets angry and upset and mean and defensive and slanderous and critical and skeptical and feisty when you hear about grace is the very part of you that is still enslaved.*

*You may still be enslaved, but are you accepted? Is the enslaved part of you accepted?*

*Does God love every single part of you, right here, right now?*

# THE LAW AND GRACE

*We make a big mistake when we conclude that the Law is the answer to bad behavior.*

Growing up, we all deal with law. Most of us had some sort of consequence for breaking a rule: grounding or spanking or loss of privileges. Those things were intended to keep us from breaking that rule again.

Logic says that before we break the rule again, we'll weigh the negative of the punishment over the benefit of breaking the rule and choose to not break the rule.

In order for this to work, the punishment therefore has to actually be worse than the benefit of breaking the rule.

*How did you grow up with rules and punishments in your family?*

*How has that affected how you relate to God?*

*How has that affected your view of the various moral and ethical codes in the Bible and preached by the church?*

*How has that affected your view of yourself and your failures?*

*This is why the gospel is such good news to those who have failed over and over and over again. The gospel offers more than a second chance.*

*Has someone ever given you a second chance?*

*How did that make you feel?*

*Did you live up to their expectations after that?*

*Or did you fail again?*

*Can you fail too many times with someone who loves you?*

*Can you fail too many times with God?*

*Jesus went after the riffraff. Not one of them was a religious person.*

When a pastor or evangelist makes the news, it's usually because of a scandal. They've been caught in some sin, and likely caught lying about it as well.

And unfortunately, too often that Christian leader is known for preaching against certain behaviors and sins similar to the one in which they've been caught. The world, if not already cynical about religious leaders, is caught by surprise, and responds as if betrayed. Words like "hypocrite" are used against the leader, who is almost always removed from leadership.

*Should we be surprised when someone fails to measure up?*

*What does Jesus's example teach us about leadership?*



*Do you find yourself angry when a Christian leader is caught in sin?*

*How does God view that person?*

It's often the church that is most vocal about how people should live their lives. This becomes a double-edged sword when the church fails to live up to its own standard.

The heart of the Christian faith, after all, is good news of God's one-way love.

There's no standard anyone has to meet.

They don't have to do the right thing.

Believe the right thing.

Say the right things.

Sing the right songs.

Marry the right person.

Give money to the right organizations.

Vote the right way.

There's nothing they can do.

*There's nothing cheap about the grace God offers repeat offenders.*

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me." (John 21:15–19 ESV)

Read this passage aloud. Reflect on Peter's life for a moment—this is the man who sank in the water when walking to Jesus, who tried to convince Jesus not to go to Jerusalem, who fell asleep when keeping watch for Jesus, who drew his sword and cut off a man's ear, who denied being one of Jesus's followers—and did some of these things multiple times. Later, Paul had to rebuke him for his hypocrisy regarding Gentile and Jewish customs (Galatians 2). And that's just what is recorded in the Scriptures.

*How did Jesus restore one close to Him who had failed?*

*Did Peter need to do anything or say anything to be accepted by Jesus?*

# THE FRUIT OF GRACE

*Grace actually inspires us.*

*Have you ever been shown grace by someone and turned yourself around?*

*Why did you do that?*

*We love those who know the worst of us and don't turn their faces away.*

*Have you experienced that kind of love before from someone?*

*Have you been able to love someone in that kind of way?*

*One-way love is the essence of any lasting transformation that takes place in human experience.*

Victor Hugo famously illustrated the power of grace in the character of Jean Valjean from *Les Misérables*. When Valjean steals from a kind bishop and is caught, the bishop claims that the silver was a gift—and hands him more silver as the rest of his gift that he “forgot” to take with him! The bishop acts counter to everything that the law would require.

*Does grace really transform in this way, or is this just a good story from a talented novelist?*

*Have you experienced grace in this way?*

*The world tells us to stand up for ourselves, to stick to our guns. But the gospel frees us to lay down our arms. There's nothing at stake and so there's nothing to fear.*

Turn to Matthew 12:9–14 and read the story of the man with the withered hand.

*What obstacles is this man facing in this story?*

*What decisions must Jesus make?*

*Explain this statement of Jesus in your own words, “How much more valuable is a person than a sheep!” (Matt. 12:12 NIV)*

*What is Jesus saying here?*

Jesus goes to the temple and the Pharisees try to trap Him in a biblical law conundrum. According to Frederick Dale Bruner, “The religious leadership believes that Sabbath law forbidding work means that only life-threatening sicknesses should be treated on the Sabbath.”<sup>1</sup> The proper answer would have been “My heart goes out to you with your hand like that. But I love God even more, and I want to obey His clear commandment.”

But Jesus will not allow the law, which was designed for the care and protection of human life, to come between this man and wholeness. Jesus heals the man and the Pharisees plan to destroy Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary Revised and Expanded Edition*, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

*The fire to love unconditionally comes only from being soaked in the fuel of being unconditionally loved.*

And this is the crux, isn't it? To turn this one-way love from God into love for others. If God's one-way love is the only thing that can transform us, then showing God's one-way love to others is the only thing that can transform them. And how will they know God's love for them if they don't experience it in love from us?

As the old hymn says, they will know we are Christians by our love.

*Who do you know who needs to understand God's one-way love for them?*

*How can you be the conduit of this love?*

# GRACE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

*We are depending on people to provide for us what we can't provide for ourselves: alrightness, forgiveness, freedom from guilt, happiness, satisfaction.*

We all have people we depend on for our self-worth.

*Who in your life do you depend on for their approval to feel good about yourself?*

*What would it look like to not need that from that person—but to also be able to enjoy your relationship with them?*

*Grace makes you lazy, right? Doesn't this unconditional condition generate apathy?*

So what if grace does make someone lazy?

Does that mean grace shouldn't be extended to them?

And if so, does that mean grace should be extended to people whom it doesn't make lazy?

And if so, doesn't that mean that they've done something to earn grace?

And then it's no longer grace.

*The thing that prevents us from taking great risks in our lives is the fear that if we don't succeed, we've lost out on something we need in order to be happy. And so we live life playing our cards close to the chest.*

Sometimes we live life with a dream—for instance, that we might quit our job someday and start our own business. We might talk about it and dream about it when we pass that “for rent” retail space on our commute to work and make spreadsheets about how much it would cost. But often it's that very dream itself that keeps us from actually quitting our job and doing it. Because the dream makes us think that we can survive one more day in our dead-end job.

But if we really believed in the dream, we'd quit our job and start our own business that very day.

So we fear our own dream because if we were to quit and try it and fail, then we'd find ourselves back in a dead-end job with no dream to help us make it through the day.

Remember what Tullian said in the first session?

“The gospel of Jesus Christ enables us to revel in our expendability.”

If we are happy because we are acceptable to God even in our unacceptability, then what can we do to earn or lose our happiness? If we truly accept ourselves as God does, we can accept the version of ourselves that would result from failing in our dream as much as we would accept the successful outcome.

*What risks have you been afraid to take because of fear?*

*How might grace empower you to take risks in your life?*

*What would a person who accepts themselves do tomorrow to take that risk?*

*The gospel alone liberates you to live a life of scandalous generosity, unrestrained sacrifice, uncommon valor, and unbounded courage. This is the difference between approaching life from salvation and not for salvation.*

*What does “from salvation” mean as opposed to “for salvation”?*

*What does “salvation” encompass here?*

*How could you be scandalously generous this week?*

*How could you be unrestrained in your sacrifice?*

*How could you show uncommon valor in your life?*

*How could you discover unbounded courage to love others as God has loved you?*

*What are you going to do with the rest of your life now that you don’t have to do anything?*

# OBJECTIONS TO ONE-WAY LOVE

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!’” (Luke 15:11–17 NIV)

Read this story together through to the end.

*Do you think the father was glad to see his son suffer poverty?*

*Would the father have ever decreed poverty on his son in order to bring him back?*

*Is poverty the only thing that would bring him back?*

Mike says in the video: “I was just praying that God would reveal Himself to me, whether that be in a car accident or whether I got pulled over.”

But Mike’s father’s only message for his son was: “It’s okay, just come home.”

Mike thought that God might get him into an accident or pulled over in order to get his attention. But Mike’s father only wanted him to know that it was okay and he could come home.

Jesus says in Luke 11:11–12 (KJV), “If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?”

*Would Mike’s father have wanted his son to get in an accident or in trouble with the law?*

*Why do we assume that God would use tragic, dangerous actions to “get our attention” or convince us that God exists?*

*Mike’s father’s message was “It’s okay, just come home.” What is God’s message to Mike?*

Steve Brown said, “Children will run from law, and they’ll run from grace. The ones who run from law rarely come back, but those who run from grace always come back.”

Consider the following revision to the prodigal son story—when asked for his inheritance, the father says, “Absolutely not. That’s not how it’s done.” And casts his son out for the grievous insult done to him in front of his family and servants.

*Would the son have come back to a father who treated him like that?*

*It’s the person who doesn’t care about obeying God who doesn’t get grace enough.*

*Do you know anyone who seems to not care about obeying God?*

*How could you show grace to them even more?*

*What actually produces a life that is pleasing to God?*

This brings up an important point. A life that is pleasing to God cannot be a life that is performance-based. God is already pleased with us. God already accepts and loves us. There's nothing we can do to make God more pleased with us.

But we can share that love with others.

We can turn around and unconditionally love others.

We can show God's love to others.

It is love and love alone that begets love.

When someone loves us and shows us grace, we instinctively want to be like that person. We want to be that person for others. We don't try to claim we actually deserved that love. We simply want to be more like the grace-giver.

*When we find immorality and disobedience, that's where people need to hear about God's grace more.*

*Where do we find immorality and disobedience in our lives today?*

*In our world today?*

*How can we be conduits of God's grace to ourselves and to others in the world?*

*How has the church gotten it wrong?*

*Do we need to get it right to earn God's favor?*

*How can we get it right?*

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