

19. WHAT IS GRACE?

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1. In John 15:5 Jesus says
I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.
2. In 1 Corinthians 4:7 Paul says
What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?
3. These two sentences enshrine what has become known as the ‘doctrine of grace’, namely that in Christian life
 - 3.1. Faith (the ability and possibility to believe in God)
 - 3.2. Love (the ability and possibility to love God and our neighbors)
 - 3.3. Are a gift from God – are possible *only* because of this gift.
 - 3.4. Left to ourselves we are unable to believe in God and to do anything which really counts as *good*.
 - 3.5. This human inability to believe and do good is seen as a consequence of human sinful state – that which often is referred to as “original sin”.
4. Especially starting from the 5th century CE some theologians started to worry about whether such a radical affirmation of dependence on God undermines human freedom
 - 4.1. If everything is a gift from God, faith included, does this mean that we do not play any part in the process of coming to believe in God? Surely, at least the initial decision to believe must be free, must depend on us and only then we receive the gift of God.
 - 4.2. It is true that human sinfulness has affected our human nature, but not to the point that we are not free to believe or not.
5. A great controversy arose on this point (the so called ‘Pelagian’ controversy) and the Church was forced to provide some clarity on it – which also led to the establishment of sharp antinomies that have plagued the theology of grace ever since: nature *vs* grace, grace *vs* freedom, justification *vs* sanctification, faith *vs* works. The outcome of the Pelagian controversy was a declaration from the Council of Orange (529 CE)
“Not only the beginning of faith but *the very desire to believe in God* is a gift of grace and beyond the power of our nature”
 - 5.1. We would not even *desire* to believe in God without the grace of God
 - 5.2. Which means that left to ourselves we do not even have the ability to want to believe.

- 5.3. It is important to note that this is an assertion of *principle* – *it is not a psychological description* of the process whereby we come to faith, and of the way grace interacts with our thinking, will, and desire.
6. The obvious dilemma originating from this statement is this:
- 6.1. if belief in God is possible only and absolutely as a gift from God, why does he not give it to every human person?
- 6.2. If some people do not believe in God, is it because God has destined them to be condemned?
- i. This gave rise to the controversy about *predestination*
- ii. And about whether God wants to save *everyone* or just *some*.
7. The Protestant tradition, especially with **Calvin** (d. 1564), has had a tendency to say that
- i. God destines some people to be saved and others to be condemned,
- ii. that this decision belongs only to God, and that
- iii. there is nothing that human beings can do about it.
- 7.2. This aspect of Calvinistic thought has been popularised with the acronym TULIP
- i. Total Depravity
- ii. Unconditional Election: God chooses the elect according to the intention of his will without any consideration of merit within the individual.
- iii. Limited Atonement: Jesus dies only for the elect.
- iv. Irresistible Grace
- v. Perseverance of the Saints
8. The Catholic tradition (usually identified with the thought of **Thomas Aquinas** (d. 1274) has had a tendency to say that
- i. Even though the original sin has impaired our ability to believe in God and do good, it has not corrupted human nature entirely
- ii. Grace does not supersede *nature* but perfects it¹
- 8.2. With regards to atonement, the instinct of Catholic thought has usually been against attempts to impose limitations on it: God wants to save everyone - on the basis of 1 Timothy 2:4
- God wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.
- i. Those who do not come to faith in God through the proclamation of the Gospel can be saved because God can act by inspiring the conscience of each person directly.
- ii. Which means that insofar as predestination has occupied the thought of Catholic theologians (usually marginally), the tendency has been to affirm that everyone is predestined to be saved.
9. Then, with regards to the way grace interacts with human freedom, there has been a significant divergence between the Protestants and the Catholics.

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¹ *Gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 1, 8 ad 2.

10. The Catholic tradition talks about

- 10.1.** grace as *virtue*, that is something that can change the way we act in a stable and reliable way – something that becomes a *habit*
- 10.2.** grace as *infused* in us, almost becoming part of what we are, repairing our nature, transforming us
- 10.3.** with the result that it looks like we entirely depend on grace only at the beginning for our belief in God. After that we are given the ability to *cooperate* with grace.

11. The Protestant tradition

- 11.1.** Thinks that the Catholic tradition domesticates grace, makes it at our disposal, and contradicts Jesus' saying "Apart from me you can do nothing".
- 11.2.** For this reason, it maintains that grace is not 'infused' but 'attributed' to us – we remain sinners but on account of Jesus God decides to *see* us as just.
- 11.3.** We can never cooperate with grace. On the contrary we keep resisting grace and whenever we do something good it is only because *now* God's grace is being effective in us.
- 11.4.** The believer remains *simul iustus et peccator*, "simultaneously just and sinner".

12. The problem with both approaches (Protestant and Catholic) is that they are abstract and polemical:

- 12.1.** The starting point is the perceived need to preserve the primacy of grace, the salvation realized by Christ, the integrity of human nature
- 12.2.** And often for the sake of argument positions harden, becomes more and more technical (cf all the distinctions between actual grace, sanctifying grace, prevenient grace, etc...).

An alternative approach**13. The best way to recover the real meaning and dynamics of grace is going back to the narrative approach of the Gospels****14. John 1**

43The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." **44**Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. **45**Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." **46**Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." **47**Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" **48**Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." **49**Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" **50**Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." **51**And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven

opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

15. Psalm 138

1O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

2You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.

3You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.

4Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.

5You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

6Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high; I cannot attain it.

13For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.

14I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.

15My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

16Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

17How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

18If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
I awake, and I am still with you.

23Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!

24And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!

15.1. There in an aspect of coming to believe which is experienced as ‘being known in a unique way”

15.2. The idea that coming to believe is an absolute grace is not a psychological description of the process through which this *actually* happens.

15.3. As Augustine puts it, God is “more inward to me than my most inward part”.²

15.4. From our viewpoint, we might feel that it is our desire, our reflection, our education, that lead us to faith. God can move and attract us even without us being aware of it.

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² *Interior intimo meo*, Confessions 3.6.11

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

- 15.5. Just as the gift of God sustains our being, so it permeates our thinking, desiring, and loving.
- 15.6. Of course at some point we experience a sudden clarity, we can be overwhelmed by inexplicable joy and peace, we may feel suddenly *certain* about the existence of God, Scripture speaks to us in a new way.
- 15.7. We have to keep the two aspects together
- i. Grace is at play not just when we are aware of it
 - ii. Grace can and does make itself felt, experienced.
16. Cf the experience of the disciples of Emmaus in Luke 24
- 16.1. They do not recognize Jesus immediately
- 16.2. They are not aware that they are being instructed by Jesus (by grace) when he explains the Scripture to them during their journey
- 16.3. At one point though there is a sudden experience: their eyes were opened
- 16.4. Only then (*after* they have come to believe) they realize that grace had been acting in them all along, even before they were aware of it: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?”
- 28So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, 29but they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them. 30When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. 31And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. 32They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” 33And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, 34saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” 35Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.
17. Grace can indeed be experience, be felt:
- 17.1. cf. Galatians 5
- 22The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23gentleness, self-control. [...] 25If we live by the Spirit, let also are led by the Spirit.
- 17.2. And Galatians 3
- 1You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. 2I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? 3Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? ^a 4**Have you experienced so much in vain**—if it really was in vain? 5So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? 6So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

18. A crucial aspect of the way grace acts in us is through *delight*:
- 18.1. Cf. St Augustine: Sermon 159.3
I ask you whether you love justice; you will answer, "I do." And it wouldn't be a true answer, unless to some extent justice delighted you.
 - One only loves, after all, what delights one. [*non amatur nisi quod delectat*]
 - i. As Scripture says: "Take delight in the Lord" (Ps 37:4).
 - 18.2. This is not an hedonist formula
 - 18.3. I love something because I like it, I find pleasure joy in it.
 - 18.4. The way our will embraces faith and love is not mechanical: only delight moves the will
 - 18.5. *delight* is the soul's weight.
19. For Augustine the paradox of the command to love is that if it be obeyed *because it is commanded*, it is not obeyed.
- 19.1. it is obeyed only if **loving** is perceived and *felt as good* in itself
 - 19.2. i.e. only if one finds delight in it
 - 19.3. not fear of punishment or hope of reward, but delight in the good, delight in loving.
20. Ultimately, the main way in which grace changes us is by allowing us to perceive, and desire *good* wherever it can be found.