

Series: AS YOU PLAN YOUR YEAR...!

Sunday July 27, 2008

SPREAD GRACE!

Luke 15

I. INTRO

- A. Most of you know that the building we're in right now has a ***past!*** Not far from where the current sign says, **The Olive Branch Community Church**—there was a previous sign that said it all. **Friction.** This front part in which we hold our services was a ***gentleman's*** club—more commonly known as a ***strip joint.*** The back part was called ***Hippodrome***—a huge night club/dance club.
1. When we started looking for a building—right at the beginning of The Olive Branch—we looked ***everywhere***—and found nothing. Our real estate agent urged us to check with the owners of Friction and see if they were interested in selling. At first they ignored us; then they offered to us for 10 million. We ultimately bought it for 3.925 million.
 2. When we came to look through the building we saw some things that were shocking, but not surprising. But we did have one surprise. We thought we had seen the whole building, but the owner said, “There’s more.” It was like a scene from CSI. The owner moved a bookcase on hinges and revealed a secret apartment—and a whole set of bedrooms right along that wall up there. Then we understood the darkness of what had gone on here. Before we brought anyone in, the leaders of The Olive Branch prayed through every single part of the building and invited God through his Spirit to cleanse and fill the place. That was the spiritual cleaning. Then we had to gut the place and re-do everything. If you were a part of that, you know how dirty of a job that was!
- B. The reason I told you that story is because it is one of the best parables I know of that describes life in our world. People in this part of the world are experts at making the exterior of life quite strong and impressive. But the truth is, the interior of our lives—you know, the secret rooms, are sometimes filled with darkness and shame. We ***look*** okay—but we're not.

-Think about this building for a minute. If the previous owners had changed the name on the outside—and occasionally held food drives and AA meetings and blood donor clinics and conferences on spirituality—would that have been enough to compensate for the secret rooms? This place didn't need a little cosmetic help; it needed new ownership and a new purpose.

-And ***that*** friends is the essence of spirituality in us. We don't need a little more spirituality thrown into the mix. We need Jesus. We need new ownership—and a new purpose. Like this building, we need an extreme makeover on the inside. It's something we can't do ourselves—you know, like a hobby in our spare time. The message at The Olive Branch--and the message of Jesus—is about ***GRACE.*** And **grace is the best news on this planet!**

II. THE STORY WE KNOW SO WELL...

- A. Last week Paul Penelton talked about a series of stories Jesus told in Luke 15 that all fit in the category of ***Lost and Found***. Jesus' friendship with less than upstanding people was drawing fire from the super-religious. So Jesus counters their criticism with three stories; about a lost coin, a lost sheep, and a lost son. In every case, what's lost is valuable; and when it's found—there's a celebration.

-The last story in the trilogy, though, is different from the others. It's about a son whose lost—not a thing, or an animal. It's a story that is very familiar—but I want to read it anyway.

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

“A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

“When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger!

I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.””

“So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’

“But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began. (Luke 15:11.24 NLT)

1. To the people listening to this story, the behavior of this younger son was this crescendo of outrageous behavior. This kid burned every bridge in his life behind him and wound up in a pigpen. Broke. Lost. Homesick. And friendless. And the people listening would've been thinking, "Serves him right!" But then Jesus' story does a U-turn. The kid comes home to his Dad—and his Dad **welcomes** him!

-Remember the story of this building—and the secret rooms behind the bookcase? We can keep up our social image as long as the door is sealed on the darkness and the shame of the hidden room. But sometimes, like the son in this story, it doesn't. It spills out into our lives. We see this all the time. We find out that a well-respected person has a secret life or a humiliating failure.

-When that happens, people who've been able to keep their own secret rooms fairly well contained and hidden say things like, "Now **there's** a person who needs help! If **anyone** needs God—**they** do!"

2. We call this story, the story of the...**Prodigal Son**. By the way, does anyone here know what the word **prodigal** means? Strangely enough—it means **wastefully extravagant!** And it's the perfect story of grace.

-It starts with a rebellious son who flips off his Dad, wastes his inheritance, and screws up his life. With just a few strokes, Jesus presents a picture of a son who lies sleepless, shivering, on the hard floor of the pig barn late at night—filled with regret. As he stares at the ceiling, listening to the pigs snort and oink in their sleep, he begins to dream about home.

-He dreams about three meals a day. He dreams of being a son, not a slave. He dreams of his Dad's love. And he thinks, "I thought I was so cool, I thought I knew what life was really all about. But I was wrong. I've disgraced my family and my God. Maybe Dad would let me **work** my way back. Start at the bottom shoveling manure--work till I drop—and at **least** eat right."

-So he thinks, "Anything is better than what I've got now. The worst he can do is turn me away." So he starts home.

-The closer he gets, the more he rehearses his speech. Then he thinks, "What a stupid idea. Why would I think he would **ever** want me back? But I've **got** to try!"

When the ranch-house came into sight, he could tell someone was coming. Maybe it was the big servant--warned to kick him off the property if he ever showed his face.

-"This is no servant," he says to himself, "I'd recognize that limp, those huge shoulders **anywhere**. It's...my Dad!" Now his Dad was running. As he got closer, he could see the tears running down the furrows of his Dad's sun-creased face--into his beard. And the servants were following.

-In the Palestinian heat of that late afternoon, father and son met and collapsed on each other in one huge soggy mess. The son was wailing--barely able to start his speech through the sobs that shook his body. His Dad calling for the robe, the ring, the sandals, and the feast. The message, **I'm SO glad you're home!** And he **was** home again--you know, where he belonged. And you should've **seen** the celebration. It became legendary in the whole community.

- B. And that's grace. Open arms, forgiveness, restoration. Anyone know who the Dad represents in this story? It's God. Please understand; this story is not an allegory; it's a story about the extravagant grace of God. Grace is the picture of all of Heaven throwing a party when people who have done the unthinkable come home. Grace is the picture of a Heavenly Father who waits with open arms—because His Son has already paid the price for sin with his life. Grace means **everyone** is welcome—even if they don't really understand God or Jesus.

1. God is all about restoring, redeeming and reconnecting all the broken, shattered pieces of this world.

And it always starts with people. And specifically, with their hearts. With their soul, the part of them that chooses—chooses direction, how to spend, how to live—who they will follow. And God is **always** at work—in piggens—strip clubs—the places you would never suspect.

2. Several years ago, a youth pastor by the name of Craig Gross was so concerned about the destructive effect pornography was having on people's hearts that he and several friends started a ministry to help those who are stuck in it. They eventually opened a website called XXXchurch.com.

-Their next step was to reach out to the people who produce it. Want to know what they did? You may not agree. They set up a booth to promote their website at a porn show in Los Angeles. Get this—they had Bibles imprinted with a cover that says, **Jesus loves porn stars**. Question—**does He?** It breaks his heart to see what they do and the harm they cause—but, if you believe in grace, if you believe in Jesus' story of the prodigal son, his encounter with people like the town prostitute who poured perfume on his head—and Zacchaeus, who had spent his life cheating others--well, you have to believe that Jesus loves porn stars.

-They didn't know **what** would happen when they started passing out Bibles. They had 5000 printed—and all 5000 disappeared in two days. The fascinating thing is that the sponsors of the porn show invited them back and gave them a charitable discount—of all things.

They've expanded their ministry to help women who wanted to get out of the industry—money to get them get a fresh start.

-It was at their first trade show that they met a guy Donny Pauling who had been making porn films for years. He was quite snarky—but curious. Over time, they found out that his Dad had been a pastor, and he had really gotten turned off by religion. He would apparently visit their website from time to time—insult them and leave a link to his porn site. But, they just kept communicating with Donny—and loving him.

-One night Craig got a call from Donny who told him that he had had enough and wanted out. Want to meet Danny and hear a little of his story?

[video]

3. Grace is amazing! Grace is shocking—and sometimes controversial! Grace is the only force powerful enough to turn strip joints into churches and pornographers into preachers! There are some people, however, who would call this “cheap grace.” Truth is—grace is **anything** but cheap!

-Months after telling this story, Jesus, God the Son, would experience the worst rejection this planet has to dole out. He'd be humiliated, slapped around, stripped and beaten--and then executed like the worst of criminals. He was still passing out grace to the man on the cross next to him when he died. The Bible says it was **that** sacrifice for sin—based on God's love for us--that makes grace possible. Jesus put it like this:

“For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17 NLT)

-When you read through the entire Bible, you find that ever since the law of sin and death and disintegration started wrecking this planet, God planned, through his Son, to restore everything. And through His Son, He made it possible for **everyone** to come home!

-From my perspective? Grace is the best deal on face of this planet! That God is restoring **everything**. That death **won't** wreck it all! And that we can get a do-over in life and live forever—all because God loved us enough to make a way home to His open arms! That's why the story of grace is called the **Gospel**--or **GOOD NEWS**. And it's the **only way home!**

III. AND NOW...THE REST OF THE STORY

- A. Anyone remember Paul Harvey? He's actually still doing his thing! He's famous for giving little-known background details on a well-known person or story and saying, "And that's the **rest** of the story. This is Paul Harvey.....Good day!"

-The surprising thing about this story is that it's about **two** sons; one who found grace, and one who apparently didn't think he needed it. So, let me read you...the **rest** of the story!

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on.

‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’

“The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, ‘All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’

“His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’” (Luke 15:25-32 NLT)

1. You have to understand that this son is the **good** son. He's the straight-arrow guy who's hard at work, dependable, apparently working the fields long after everyone else had clocked out. You'd like him. In fact, you'd probably choose him as **your** son—or your employee—over his younger brother. He's the typical older sibling--responsible and dependable. And he deserves to inherit the farm—and he knows it.

-Question. What word would describe his attitude toward his younger brother? How about **love**? How about **respect**? **Tolerate**? How about **contempt**? If any of you have had a sibling who went off the rails and put your family—particularly your parents—through hell, you can probably identify with how he feels.

2. When the older brother comes home from the field— smells the roast beef au jus and hears the music pulsing in the night air—he’s curious about what’s going on. When he finds out that it’s a homecoming party for his younger brother, he’s furious.

-He says to himself, “Well, I don’t care! I’m not going to fake it! I can’t **stand** him! He won’t even listen to his Dad who comes out to reason with him—and bring him into the party. And his bitterness spills out onto his father. He spits out the words, “Yeah, you throw a big party for him and serve filet mignon—and yet you’ve never even served hamburgers and fries for me and my friends.” Can anyone think of a word or a phrase that describes how he feels? **UNFAIR! It’s not fair!** Sometimes grace doesn’t seem fair to fine upstanding people!

3. The bizarre twist to this story is that in the end, it’s the younger brother—the screw-up--who’s the guest of honor at a huge party—eating roast beef, the family ring back on his finger, living in the full embrace of a Dad who’s ecstatic. “I’m **so glad** you’re home!

-I think this story has the wrong title in most bibles. I don’t think it should be called, **The Prodigal Son**. I think it should be called, **The Prodigal Father!**

-And it’s the responsible, straight-arrow, dependable son who remains outside the joy, outside the party, his bitterness alienating him from both his Dad and his brother.

4. I’ll tell you what the core truth is here. I’m the prodigal. I need grace. The amazing news of Jesus is that no sin can take me so far from the Father that I’ll never find his open arms. But I **also** see myself in the older brother.
 - If I were to be totally honest, I’d have to admit that it’s **very** easy for me to feel contempt for the predators who oppress and use and abuse the people of this world. I resent the Donny Paulings of the world—who destroy people’s souls for money. I’m afraid of people whose lives run on hatred.

-To be honest, there’s a part of me that would love to see God send fire from Heaven and incinerate the people who create all this mess. Yep! I’m the older brother—until I realize that if God were to burn all the people off this planet that cause pain—I’d be a crispy critter, too.

-And I’m the older brother—until I realize that it was the older brother types who couldn’t stand Jesus and eventually nailed him to the cross—and laughed as he squirmed in pain—and died. I’m the older brother—until I realize that unless my heart and my attitude changes, I will grow more and more cynical. And I will miss the homecoming party the Father throws.

-I don't **want** to be the Prodigal who brings the Father pain. And I don't **want** to be the older, self-righteous brother who **also** brings the Father pain. And that's good, because, see, **our calling as Followers of Jesus is to be like the Father who welcomes both to the party! If...IF...they'll come.**

- B. Now—here's the question. If the story of the prodigal son is a picture of grace, why **wouldn't** everyone want to be welcomed home—no matter what they've done? I have some thoughts on this. Remember how the wayward son had to hit absolute bottom—sleeping with the pigs; salivating as he watched them eat—before he would consider coming home?

-It's hard to admit that you've hit bottom and need help. To humble yourself. When you stalk out the door declaring, "I **hate** the farm! I'm going to go and make it big in pigs! I'm going to be the Swiss Chalet Tsar of Swine!"—and all you end up with is *odour du pig*—it's kind of humiliating. Also, your instincts tell you that to come home is to be exposed, shamed. That when you've burned all your bridges—it grace and forgiveness sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? That someone who knows **all** your secrets would welcome you back? But when you **do** believe—and come home? The relief is exhilarating. John Newton, former slave trader, wrote, **Amazing grace, how sweet the sound! That saved a wretch like me!**

1. Now, if shame and disbelief would be the biggest barrier for the wayward son, what do you think is the biggest barrier for older brothers? Straight arrow high achievers who impress the world with their shined up lives and super work ethic? Any thoughts?

-A different sort of pride. See, older brother types have typically spent their lives earning they own way, their own reputation, researching their options. Wayward sons **know** they need help and need Jesus. Older brothers are typically into self-help and impression management. Oh, they have the secret room—they know that—but they've convinced themselves that things like pride and unforgiveness and contempt are more acceptable than wasting your Dad's fortune on parties and prostitutes!

-In our world, people think, "Grace? Humility? I'm not **good** enough? You've gotta be kidding! Yeah, I'm not like Mother Theresa, but I'm sure a lot better than the other scumbags out there!"

2. That's the tough thing in our world. Most people are quite condescending about the message of sin and grace. Word on the street is, "I can be a spiritual person without grace, without the church, and without Jesus, thank you very much!" And typically, they will then point out the worst of religion and the followers of Jesus they know—and there's **plenty** to point at.

-But what we **can't** get away from is what Jesus taught; being a spiritual person, being a religious person, being a straight arrow man or woman isn't enough. All these people who hated Jesus most would put a lot of us to shame with their prayers, good deeds, and Bible knowledge. But they needed Jesus.

-And **we** need Jesus. We need God. Not to just correct and do a little cosmetic touch-up work on the scratches and dents. We need an extreme makeover; a transformation so thorough—Jesus called it a **new birth**. We can't do it. Only the Spirit of God can. And He does it when we invite him into the core of our lives and give Him permission to do what he needs to do, and the keys to all the rooms. Even the secret rooms behind the bookcase.

-Friends, we just need to be really, **really** clear about this. If the grace Jesus offers through His death isn't really necessary; if we can choose some self-improvement program, or some religious ritual—and stitch together our own plan and that's okay too.

That totally contradicts everything Jesus taught about Himself and about eternity.

-The point in Jesus' life was not to shame everyone into coming—but to **welcome** everyone home; wayward brothers and older brothers alike. The bad news is that **everyone** needs grace; the good news is God's grace includes **everyone!** The playing field is level. The bad news is that doing all kinds of good things, being religious, being spiritual, being green—even helping the poor and oppressed—isn't enough to earn eternal life. The good news is that grace mends our broken relationship with the Father and gives us spiritual power to do amazing, life-changing things!

-But Jesus is the only way. He's unique. He's God in flesh. And He came and died in my place and yours.

C. Friends, this puts everyone here—and every human on this planet squarely at the cross-roads. God is restoring all things to Himself. He has a plan—and it's an amazing one—and Jesus is the plan of restoration of all things to Himself. Including us.

1. So. What does God want **us** to do about grace? Well the first thing He wants us to do is welcome His Son, Jesus, for Who He is. To come home. To receive His Spirit as the central guest in our lives—whether we're in a pigpen or a steel and glass tower. To allow him to transform us, to re-think **everything**—and let Him lead. And to receive this transformation and all it means for eternity—simply as a gift.

-I believe that God is searching for some of you! He loves and values you more than you love and value yourself. He stands with open arms, and the only barrier between you and Him—and all you want for eternity is... **YOU!** He's calling your name—and it's time to come home. Whether you're the younger wayward child—or the older straight-arrow responsible kid. **Everyone** needs grace.

2. But what then? I mean, do we just sit around the ranch house telling stories about the good old days till we die? Of **course** not. God is now at work **in** you—and His plan is to completely restore you—with your cooperation, of course. He wants to work love and compassion into every corner of your heart; He wants to give you power to overcome the stuff that holds you back in every way.

-He wants to guide you in building meaningful relationships with others. He wants to work peace into the areas where you're worried; joy into the areas where you're crabby and upset. He does **magnificent** work! It's a total interior makeover—and, with your cooperation—it will continue for the rest of your life and last on into eternity.

3. When that happens, when we receive grace—that's our calling to give grace. To stand with open arms. To embrace others—and to embrace Jesus mission of reclaiming and restoring the world. Not in the sense that we occasionally think about it and throw some spare change at it. **Our** mission. We are the eyes, mouth, hands and feet of Jesus in reclaiming this planet. That reclamation includes helping solve the problems of this world—hunger, poverty, disease; it involves helping solve the energy problems, the garbage problems. And **especially** finding those who are lost to God.

-You know what God's secret weapon is in spreading grace? Love—and **humility**. I told you about the XXXChurch.com team and how they went to the porn shows with Bibles that said, "Jesus Loves Porn Stars." Another group stood outside the show with signs that said, **Sin Means Death**, yelling through bullhorns, "You think you can get away with you sins? Stupid people! Stupid people!" Sin **does** mean death—but they turned it into a message of anger and contempt. Jesus never did that.

-How many of you have ever found yourself motivated to do good by the shame and contempt of others? Love is powerful; shame is not! Grace says, "I welcome you home, just as you are—because I love you!"

4. Where do you start? Well, Jesus told his disciples, "start in Jerusalem." I.e.—where you are right now. See, we many times think of going to exotic, desperate places—and that's a good thing. But the truth is that our lives will have the most effect on those who know us well and see us everyday. Most of us have a circle of people—neighbors, family, co-workers--maybe about 10 of them—right around us. Start with that group—and love them as Jesus would—until they ask questions.

-When they ask questions, bring them! We're here as a church to stand behind you and them—and support their search for God.

-Remember Jesus words—that God didn't send his Son to **judge** the world—but to **save** it? Well, He hasn't called us to be right—to judge and create conviction in others. That's the work of the Spirit, and He's an **expert!** He crumbles barriers from the inside. He's called us to have a loving influence on others. As we spread grace—kindness, love, integrity, generosity, peace and joy—people are attracted to Jesus.

That's what he was like. See, the way it works, friends, is that the world gets changed—one life, one act of kindness, one act of forgiving an enemy, one act of sacrifice and compassion—one act of grace at a time. We are called to be like the Father in the story!

5. Craig Gross, the guy that reached out to Donny, is now working at loving a guy who is the biggest star in the porn industry; Ron Jeremy. God is at work. After a recent series of debates on university campuses about pornography—Ron **for**, Craig **against**—Ron and Craig were playing ping-pong in Craig's basement. They had these fake bets going on what they would have to give up if they lost the game.
-Ron said to Craig, "If I win, I want your home, your wife, your children—**I want YOUR life!**" Who but a Father with open arms could create that kind of desire in his heart? Jesus' life proves just how powerful love really is!

IV. CLOSING

God has called us, not just to **enjoy** grace—but to spread it wherever we go. The deal is—you will **never** come to a place, to a situation, to a person—where God is **not** already at work. He's at work in the **most** unlikely places. Piggens. Tax booths. Diners. Offices. Even at porn shows—not that I would recommend you go to one! God **loves...LOVES...**people who are lost to Him. And He wants us to love them too!