

A Sermon Series for Lent 2024

Sermon 3: A Revolution of Grace

Sunday 10 March: The Fourth Sunday in Lent

A series of talks focused on Jesus, to lead us through the Season of Lent, into Holy Week and to our celebration of the Resurrection at Easter.

- Note: This is a follow-on from Sermon 2, which focused on some of the sayings of Jesus from what we call The Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes, which are uncompromising and impossible to completely follow. Yet even in those words of Jesus, grace is to be found, and once we understand the link with the concept of grace, we need not fear God's condemnation in our imperfections.
- Themes and quotations are from "The Jesus I Never Knew" by Philip Yancey (first edition: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).
- The book is not currently in print in Australia, but copies (second-hand, or ordered via Amazon) are available via the Internet, and there are free down-loadable PDF formats of the book.
- The Parish Newsletter emailed on Friday 8 March has a short summary of Yancey's background plus links to Sermons 1 & 2.
- I have repeated that background information at the conclusion to these sermon notes for ease of reference, and every book of Yancey's also includes relevant aspects of his story in his own words.

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#### A Revolution of Grace

Themes and quotations are from "**The Jesus I Never Knew**" by Philip Yancey, Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), **Chapter 8: A Revolution of Grace, pp 145 – 161.**

**Let us pray:**

Lord Jesus,  
 your responses to people shown to us through the gospels  
 provide us with a glimpse into the heart of God.  
 You shower people with mercy and grace.  
 Yet that is your big-hearted, open-handed manner,  
 also shown clearly to us through the gospels.  
 Open our hearts, our minds and our spirits  
 to perceive your gracious nature,  
 and to see more clearly into the heart of God. Amen.

*[Nic DD. May be freely used.]*

**Introductory link with Sermon 2:** *(not read in the sermon, for lack of time)*

In his own social interactions, Jesus was putting into practice "the great reversal" heralded in the Beatitudes. Normally in this world we look up to the rich, the beautiful, the successful. Grace, however, introduces a world of new logic. Because God loves the poor, the suffering, the persecuted, so should we. Because God sees no undesirables, neither should we. By his own example, Jesus challenged us to look at the world through what Irenaeus would call "grace-healed eyes."

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"You can know a person by the company he keeps," goes the proverb. First century Jewish residents of the Roman Province of Palestine would have experienced consternation trying to apply that principle to Jesus of Nazareth.

The Gospels mention eight occasions when Jesus accepted an invitation to dinner – I'm sure there were many more, but they are not recorded. Three of them were normal social occasions among friends: the wedding at Cana, hospitality in the home of Mary and Martha, and the meal with travellers to Emmaus after his resurrection.

But the other five defy all general social rules. On one occasion Jesus dined with Simon the Leper. That seems to have been his name, not Simon the Carpenter, the Lawyer, the Farmer, but Simon the Leper.

Yancey has worked closely with a leprosy specialist, Dr Paul Brand, especially in the USA and India, and in other books, has written extensively of this work and of lessons for life and human wellness learned from this work. He writes that because of his work with Paul...

"... I too have dined with leprosy patients, and I can tell you that years of medical progress have done little to lessen the social stigma of the disease. One refined, educated man in India told me of the day he sat weeping in a car out-side a church as his daughter got married within. He dared not show his disfigured face, lest all the guests leave. Nor could he host the traditional wedding banquet, for who would enter the home of a leper?"

In Jesus' day, laws enforced the stigma against leprosy. The afflicted had to live outside city walls and yell "Unclean!" when they approached anyone. Yet Jesus ignored those rules and reclined at the table of a man who wore that stigma as part of his name.

To make matters worse, during the course of the meal a disreputable woman poured expensive perfume on Jesus' head. According to the Gospel of Mark, Judas Iscariot left the meal in disgust and went straight to the chief priests to betray Jesus.

Another time, Jesus shared a meal with a different man named Simon, when yet another woman anointed Jesus with perfume, wiping his feet with her hair and her tears. This Simon was a proper Pharisee and recoiled at what seemed a big indiscretion. "Jesus gave a searing reply that helps explain why he preferred the company of "sinners and tax collectors" over outstanding citizens like Simon:

(explain cultural issues re water for washing dusty feet and the still-common custom in Mediterranean societies of men greeting one another with a kiss on the cheek – as I experienced when growing up when Greek cousins and uncles visited).

Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little, loves little.

Another time, Jesus accepted hospitality from a prominent Pharisee, when many of the religious leaders were checking him out and inviting him to meals in order to scrutinize his every move. On one Sabbath day, Jesus healed a man, and then drew a sharp contrast between the social climbing banquets of the Pharisees and God's banquet spread for 'the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame'.

"The Gospels record no other meals with prominent citizens, and I can easily understand why: Jesus hardly made for a soothing dinner guest."

Two other meals we're told about in the Gospels took place in the homes of tax collectors, who may be unpopular everywhere, but were regarded as traitors in Jewish society because they served the occupying Roman Empire, collecting taxes on a commission basis, extorting people and keeping their unjust profits. For that reason, money from a tax collector given for the poor could not be accepted by a Jew, and Jewish courts would not accept their testimony as truthful.

But Jesus invited himself to the homes of tax collectors. When Zaccheus, ostracized by his community, climbed a tree to get a good view of Jesus over the heads of the crowd because he was short, Jesus was aware of him and asked to stay at his house. Jesus responded to the disapproving crowd by saying: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

When he came across Levi in his tax-collecting booth, his response to the crowd was, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."

Yancey writes: "Reading about Jesus' assorted dinner companions, I search for a clue that might explain why Jesus made one group (sinners) feel so comfortable and the other group (pious) feel so uncomfortable. I find such a clue in one more scene from the Gospels that brings together Pharisees and a blatant sinner simultaneously.

The Pharisees have caught a woman in the act of adultery, a crime that calls for the death penalty. What would Jesus have them do? they ask, hoping to trap him in a conflict between morality and mercy.

Jesus pauses, writes on the ground for a moment, then says to the accusers, 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' When all of them have filed away, Jesus turns to the cringing woman. 'Where are they? Has no one condemned you?' he asks. 'Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin'."

Perhaps prostitutes, tax collectors, and other known sinners responded to Jesus so readily because at some level they knew they were wrong and to them God's forgiveness looked very appealing. As C. S. Lewis has said, 'Prostitutes are in no danger of finding their present life so satisfactory that they cannot turn to God: the proud, the avaricious, the self-righteous, are in that danger'."

[Yancey then continues with examples of Jesus' radical behaviour towards women and people oppressed in various ways, towards the sick, towards Gentiles; these are not included in the sermon, for lack of time.]

In word and in deed Jesus was proclaiming a radically new gospel of grace: to get clean a person did not have to journey to Jerusalem, offer sacrifices, and undergo purification rituals. Jesus moved the emphasis from God's holiness (exclusive) to God's mercy (inclusive). Instead of the message "No undesirables allowed," he proclaimed, "In God's kingdom there are no undesirables."

By going out of his way to meet with Gentiles, eat with sinners, and touch the sick, he extended the realm of God's mercy. To Jewish leaders, Jesus' actions jeopardized the existence of their religious caste system – no wonder the Gospels mention more than twenty occasions when they conspired against Jesus.

One of Jesus' stories, contrasting a pious Pharisee with a remorseful tax collector, captures the inclusive gospel of grace in a nutshell. The Pharisee, who fasted twice a week and tithed on schedule, piously thanked God that he was above robbers, evildoers, and adulterers – and far above the tax collector standing to the side.

The tax collector, too humiliated even to raise his eyes to heaven, prayed the simplest prayer, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Jesus drew the conclusion, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God."

Can we infer from Jesus' story that behaviour does not matter, that there is no moral difference between a disciplined legalist and a robber, evildoer, and adulterer. Of course not. Behaviour matters in many ways; it simply is not how to get accepted by God.

The sceptic A.N. Wilson comments on Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and tax collector:

"It is a shocking, morally anarchic story.

All that matters in the story appears to be God's capacity to forgive."

Precisely.

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### **LENT SERMON SERIES**

**– background notes from the Parish Newsletter, 08 March 2024**

Rev Nic's recent sermons for Lent are based on themes in books by a prominent Christian writer, Philip Yancey. Older generations who loved the works of C.S. Lewis often compare him favourably as a "contemporary Lewis".

Raised in an ultra-conservative Southern USA sect of the Baptist Church, he broke away after a suffocating experience in Bible College as a young man, realising that the faith that proclaimed Grace was poorly represented by limited forms of the Christian faith he had experienced so far.

With his knack of presenting deep Christian truths with clarity and relevant insights, he became and remains a highly regarded Christian writer whose books have been translated into many languages read around the world.