

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 17

Responding to grace in our relationships

How do we respond to God's grace? One way that we respond is by extending grace to others, in our families, neighborhoods, and workplaces. If we are going to live with God forever, we will also be living with each other forever. We were designed not for eternal isolation, but for living together and interacting with one another.

Life's greatest joys come in our relationships with other people. Life's greatest hurts come from other people, too. So if eternal life is going to be happy, we need to learn to get along with people without hurting them. The essential ingredient we need here is love. The most important commandment, Jesus said, is to love God, and the second-most-important command is, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

If we are going to be like Jesus, we need to love people—even people who are hard to love. Jesus set the example for us, coming to die even for the people who hated him. As good parents know, love means a willingness to be inconvenienced, a willingness to set aside our own concerns to attend to the needs of someone else. Love is a lot more than good feelings—it must also include good actions.

Willing to serve

God is good not because he is powerful, but because he is good. He always uses his power to help other people, not to serve himself. We praise people who risk their lives to save others; we do not praise people who had the power but refused to use it. We admire self-sacrifice, not selfishness.

Jesus came to serve, not to lord it over people (Matthew 20:28). He told his disciples they should not be like power-hungry rulers, but should set an example by helping people. "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (verse 26). Jesus shows us what the Father is like (John 14:9)—not just what he was like 2,000 years ago, but what he is like all the time.

True greatness is not in power, but in service. God sets the example; as does Jesus. The meaning of life is not in having authority over others, but in helping people. That is the only way that eternal life is going to be enjoyable for everyone.

Jesus set many examples of service. A special one happened the evening before his crucifixion. He got down and washed the 12 disciples' feet as a lesson in humility and service. "I have set you an example," he said, "that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15). Don't consider yourself too important to kneel down and help somebody. Leaders in the church should be servants.

Paul said we should "serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13). "Carry each other's burdens," he wrote, "and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3).

If we are selfish, we will never be satisfied, but if we serve, we will find it self-rewarding. We are more satisfied when we help than when we take. Jesus told us this because it is so unlike the assumptions that most people make.

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for

our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:10-11). If we want to be like Jesus, if we want to have a meaningful life, then we need to serve others.

Serving in the church

One way that we serve others is by being active participants in a community of believers—a church. No church is perfect, just like no person is perfect, but the church is something that God designed to help us on our journey with Jesus. The church teaches us about Jesus, reminds us of his grace and promises, and gives us opportunities to worship together. The church helps us keep our purpose in focus.

The church also gives us opportunities to exercise patience and forgiveness. We may not like these “opportunities,” but they still help us learn to be more like Jesus. Paul reminds us of the example we follow: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Educators know that we learn by listening, but we learn much more when we participate. Jesus taught his disciples not just in words, and not just in his example, but also by giving them work to do. “He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Luke 9:2). After his resurrection, he again assigned them work: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And they learned as they went.

If you want to be like Jesus, get involved in his work. He left it to us, not because we could do a better job than anyone else, but because it is for our good. We will learn more, and be changed more, by getting involved.

Different talents

Have you ever noticed that different people have different strengths? Believing in Jesus does not eliminate our differences. Being like Christ does not mean that we all have to look alike, dress alike and act alike. In fact, God purposely gives different strengths to different people (1 Corinthians 12:11).

We are not to brag about our abilities, nor to wish we had someone else’s (verses 14-26). Rather, we are to use our skills “for the common good” (verse 7).

Some people are very talented, but no one has all the talents that society needs. God makes sure that everybody is lacking something, so that we learn to work together. “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10). The church is a great place to learn to be like Jesus by serving other people.

We are to serve people’s physical needs, and also their spiritual needs. One of the biggest spiritual needs that this world has is the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. The church is called to take this message to the world; each believer has a message that can encourage and help many others, and we will become more like Jesus if we become less self-conscious and more willing to share the message.

Why do we share the gospel? It is not a means of getting brownie points with God. It is not a way for us to brag about how good we are. Rather, it is a way to serve others, to help them with one of their most serious needs in life.

People need to know that God loves them, that their lives have meaning and purpose, that there really is hope even when physical life seems pointless. God has good news for them, and we share it because people need it.

Of course, it is deeply satisfying to be used by God to help someone else. Sharing the gospel gives us a tremendous sense of significance, because we are taking part in a work of eternal worth, sharing in the work of God himself. That’s part of what it means to be like God, to be like Jesus. God made us in such a way that we would find our deepest satisfactions in doing the work that he himself does. We were made for this!

Relationships of grace

We are saved by grace, not by our works. God sent Jesus to die for us, and he forgives us, not on the basis of our works, but because of his mercy. Now, if God is like that, and we were born to be like God, what does this say about our relationships

with one another? It totally transforms them!

If we follow Jesus, grace needs to fill our families, our friendships and our workplaces. Being like Jesus means that we are not always demanding to get our own way. We are not bragging about ourselves or insulting others. Paul describes the results of God at work in our lives: “The fruit of [God’s] Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

“Honor one another above yourselves,” Paul writes (Romans 12:10). “Live in harmony with one another” (verse 16). “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2).

“Encourage one another and build each other up.... Always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else” (1 Thessalonians 5:11, 15).

Husbands, how would it make a difference in the way you treat your wife? (See Ephesians 5:25.) Wives, how would it affect you? (See verse 22.) Those who are employed, how would it affect your work? (See Ephesians 6:5-8.)

We all start out unlike Jesus. We start as sinners, as enemies of God, as selfish, self-seeking people. And yet that is precisely what we need to be saved from, to be rescued from. So there’s a lot of changing that needs to happen.

If we are to be like Jesus, our relationships may have to change a lot. It won’t be easy, and it won’t happen overnight. It takes time, so we need patience with the process, both in ourselves and in others. We need faith that God will finish the work he has started in us.

God has the most fulfilled, most satisfying life possible—and he wants us to enjoy eternal life, too. He wants us to be like he is. God is “compassionate and gracious ... slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7).

Michael Morrison