

## **Stewards of Grace —Sonia Perez**

[Editor's Note: This sermon commences with a skit.]

I want to talk to you about being a good steward of God's grace. That's probably a weird idea to you. It was to me, until I read 1 Peter 4:10.

"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace" (ESV). In that verse, and those that follow it, Peter is explaining not only *that* we are called to serve one another, but *why*.

God has lavished His grace on us. He's filled the earth with beauty and love, pouring such gifts on creatures who disgraced Him and are destined for death. To save those creatures, He gave Himself, sparing nothing. In a display of divine humility, He accepted the scorn of humanity and repaid it with love.

Our scorn takes many forms. Some reject God entirely, preferring to live as if they don't *want* grace, throwing themselves into any and every worldly pleasure. Others scorn God by living as if they don't *need* grace, outwardly displaying their piety, while inwardly waiting for God to die, so they can have their own way. Some go back and forth between the two extremes.

Both cast God's grace aside as if worthless; when they are called to receive grace and pour it on others as it has been poured on them.

## **Not Only Are We Saved by Grace, We Live by Grace**

God gave us romantic love to teach us how we are to relate to Him, as a model and reflection of our relationship with Him. When we first fall in love and commit to God, we are taking on His name and are identifying ourselves as His bride of Revelation.

In the skit, the couple is in love. Their intimate relationship, full of togetherness and protection, seems ideal. Their commitment is eternal and their love divine. However, what at first seems caring and trusting, turns controlling and distrustful. A relationship built on sacrifice and service becoming one, sharing even the same name, becomes a battle

for freedom and control. Isn't that how it is for us? One day we choose to follow God and are so excited and in love. We would follow Him anywhere, do anything for Him. But then it starts to feel overwhelming. Look at Peter. He claimed to follow Jesus even unto death, only to betray Him a short time later. "Why did you first fall in love?" asks the banker, who becomes counselor in the skit.

Growing up as a Seventh-day Adventist, I couldn't wait for Jesus to come, which I always thought would come before I became an adult.

Why worry so much about the future when Jesus would come long before that? I loved Sabbath school, summer camp, Pathfinders, my Adventist school. I use to pray every day before we were picked up for school that God would bring me someone I could bless. I was so in love with Jesus. Life with Him seemed like such a blessing and a gift. Even then I don't think I fully understood that I was especially called to bless even those who hurt, exclude, or hate me, I was called to truly show grace to those who didn't deserve it.

Jesus is our benevolent Benefactor. We are created in His image and are to be this to the world. That means, not only do we look like Him in likeness, but our character should reflect Him as well. Stewardship is a spiritual not just a physical act. Showing grace is being God's steward and representative of His love on earth.

In the story of the prodigal son, we see this because the younger son asks for his inheritance. Of course, in order to get an inheritance, someone must have died first. But that seemed a mere inconvenience (or minor technicality) to the younger brother I suppose. But until the father dies, everything still belongs to him.

The younger son's share would be 1/3 and the older son's would be 2/3. By giving his younger son 1/3 of the inheritance, the father probably had to sell off some land, which meant no future profit could be made on it. So the father, in the culture's eyes is a terrible steward. And what does the father do? He gives it to him.

The audience listening to this parable are tax collectors and sinners, but also Pharisees and teachers of the law. This would have been shocking and disrespectful to this patriarchal audience. The next shock is not only does the father give his son the money, but the son goes out and wastes it on selfish living. He goes to the clubs, to the casinos, to the prostitutes and wastes it, denying himself nothing that he believes will bring him pleasure. Maybe he always had a

bit of a rebellious streak. While everyone else was working to manage the father's house and wealth, he would sneak away and lie in a hammock somewhere, only reappearing at meal times. "There are too many rules here, Dad. Why does everything have to be done your way? I have my OWN plans for my life. I don't want to WORK here with you. What gives you the right to tell me how to live my life and what to do with MY inheritance—after all, it is my money anyway. I just need some space, Dad. I want to live my own life apart from you. Just give me MY money and let me do what I want to do NOW. I don't want to wait for later."

He loses everything and ends up homeless on the street, begging for money. Everyone who was his friend while he was the one paying the check now deserts him. He ends up finding a menial job caring for pigs, which is about the lowest position you could get (lowest you could sink to) as a Jewish young adult. As he pictures himself snagging a morsel of corn from the pigs' mouths, the Word tells us he comes to his senses. It is like all of sudden he thinks back to his life in his father's house, and He remembers that even His Father's lowest servants always have enough to eat, and here he is hanging out in the mud with the pigs. So He comes up with a plan, and he starts practicing his speech. He can't ask his dad to let him come into the house again, not even as a house servant. But maybe, just maybe, His dad, who is generous with everyone, will allow him to work as a hired servant who comes in as a day laborer. If his dad will let him do that, then maybe, just maybe, he can pay his dad back the money he feels he owes him. This son who first saw himself as entitled, now sees himself as indebted. By taking his inheritance early, he walked away from any further money or further relationship from his family and his dad. He now felt he had no right to take His father's name or to be called His father's son, and was ready to accept his new identity as a hired hand.

Can you relate? Has there been a time when you just wanted to forget your roots, who your family is, or that you are a Christian? Do you sometimes wish you can just be anonymous and can go just do whatever you want with whomever you want and just live a little without worrying about what people might think of you. Have you ever felt everything would just be easier if you could just do whatever you want with your money and your time? It's my life anyway, what right does God have to butt into who I hang out with and what I choose to do with my money and resources?

Then we have the older brother, also growing up in his dad's house. Being older, he always felt the pressure of having to set a good example for his younger brother. When his younger brother goofed off, he had to be the one to pick up the slack, and to balance his brother, so he became the best son he could be. He didn't settle on being a voyager in Pathfinders; he became a master guide. He didn't want to just do Bible study; he had to win the Pathfinder Bible

Experience every year. He never settled for an A-; he had to have an A+. He didn't want to just play basketball; he needed to be the captain of the team. It's true that his dad never said he had to do all that, but he knew that was expected of him, or so he thought. Not only did he have to show his little brother what it meant to be good, but he had to make sure all the servants in the house also saw what it meant to be a good worker for his father.

So he worked double, triple above what everyone else did. If the servants were working in the field, he needed to show what it meant to be a good leader, so he would work beside them. He had to be the best at whatever he did, and he would work longer hours than anyone else. After all, that is what His Father wanted him to do. That is how his dad became so successful in the first place, right? What better way to prove he was his father's son than to make his dad proud that his son carried his name. It didn't matter that he felt grumpy all the time, and tired all the time. He was doing what His dad expected of him, and that was that. It didn't matter if he felt like a slave in his dad's house. He would follow the rules because that is what everyone would expect of someone with his last name.

Maybe you feel like this son some days. You keep doing what you feel you are supposed to do. You tithe not only 10 percent but sometimes 15 percent. You look on the tithe envelope and do your best to follow all the suggested offerings, even if you are not really sure where they go to or what they are for. You teach cradle roll, are a deacon, an elder, run potluck, and greet every Sabbath. You volunteer to feed the homeless, count the offering, and wake up to pray at 6 a.m. for whatever cause is needed at the time. You follow every rule because that is what is expected if you call yourself a child of God.

This is our responsibility, our fate, and it goes with our name. We will keep working till the day we die—that is what we are called to do, after all. Isn't that what we were created for? To serve God with everything we have? This is what gives us our identity, isn't it? This is how I have earned the right to be His child. The Bible says by His fruits we will know Him, right? The older son was the one who should have gone out and reconciled his younger brother with his father.

He should have killed the fatted calf to reinstate his brother into the family. The younger son could only be restored if the older brother allowed it. He would have to be willing to split the diminished inheritance again, his 2/3 portion with his younger brother. The older brother should have joined the party, reinstating his younger brother into the

community. But he sees himself as a slave working in his father's house. And when His dad throws a party, he refuses to celebrate.

The nation of Israel also often acted like the older brother and saw the Gentiles and Samaritans as the younger brother. This story was written especially for the *Pharisees and religious leaders* who the older brother represented. What was their treatment of tax collectors and sinners? In order for a sinner or an outcast to be reinstated in the community, many looked at how a religious leader treated them. A leader's action or inaction determines whether those in our church or society experience inclusion and community. Are we acting as stewards of grace?

This father is extravagant, wasteful, and even hopeful with his grace. This patriarchal audience filled with Pharisees and religious leaders would have thought the father was weak as they listened to this story. How would the world identify us by our actions?

As His children created in His image, we should also provide, protect, care, give, restore, and help redeem those whom God has entrusted into our care in faithfulness and direction of Jesus Christ. How do we treat women, children, refugees, Muslims, gays, the least of these in society?

### **Neither Son Acts Like the Father**

Younger son—poor steward, wasteful. He desires freedom. He asks, What is in it for me?

Older son—great steward by earthly standards, but his works are done out of duty, obligation. He sees himself as a slave.

Where did Jesus ground His identity?

Right before Jesus faced His temptations, He was baptized, and He heard His Father say, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17, ESV). He knew who His Father was, and so He couldn't be swayed to listen to anyone else's voice.

Isaiah 43:1 tells us Jesus redeemed us! We are free! Jesus does what the older brother refused to do. Jesus took on humanity to save us. As our nearest Relative, our Creator, and our Brother, Jesus was the only one who could redeem us from sin. He paid our ransom with His life and reconciled us to the Father. He sought after His brothers and sisters.

### **Conclusion: Who Are You?**

We are saved by God's matchless grace. Everything we have is by God's grace. Everything we are is by God's grace. It's a message we've heard often. Equally often we've failed to comprehend what it means. We may roll our eyes when we hear sermons on grace, or yawn and say to ourselves, "Tell me something new" or even "Blah blah blah." It's a reaction many of us have had. We forget why we first fell in love with God.

In the story of the prodigal son, the generous and merciful father is the only one who seems to show true love and faithfulness. We do the same thing with our tithes and offerings. We either want to use it all for ourselves like the younger brother, or instead of returning it to God in gratitude and out of a loving relationship with Him, we see it more as a payment or an obligation.

I have realized that there have been times when I have ignored, rejected, or hurt people in my life because I have felt they were undeserving of mercy or grace. "They got themselves in their own mess, why should I help them?" However, I understand it is because of my selfishness and lack of recognition of grace in my life that I withhold love and mercy. Which brother are you more like? Or like me, have you been both?

Though both his sons bring shame to his name and his household, he says with love, forgiveness, and extravagant grace, "Everything I have is yours," when really everything he has is his, yet him saying that makes it theirs. Whenever we find ourselves in great need, physically or spiritually, God, our Father, is ready and willing to pour out His blessing on us.

My uncle Steve can testify to this. In his own words, he shares about a soup kitchen he opened in West Sacramento, California.

"The building was ready. The paint had dried. Turquoise burlap covered the various bulletin boards. It was time to unlock the doors for the first time. I sat at my desk, frozen with fear. Most of the people that would come to frequent the mission were homeless or lived in tiny, run-down shacks in the neighborhood. Nearly all of them were alcoholics. On the other hand, I had never drunk a drop of alcohol, nor had a desire to do so. I knew I had a call to do this work, but I couldn't bring myself to open the door. How could I reach these people that I was afraid to speak to? I wasn't sure I could care for them. Then a scripture came into my mind, ' "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" ' (Matt. 25:40, KJV).

"We went ahead and opened those doors soon after. Our Loud Cry Mission had no formal support. We prayed for every penny that came in. We fed the people breakfast every morning and an early dinner in the afternoon. One day, the Mission ran out of coffee. We didn't have any money either. All we had was the seven cups of the previous day's coffee still in the pot. The stores were not open yet, and it was a cold day. Besides that, we had no money, and no one was awake that might have felt impressed to give us some. It was a 30-cup coffee pot. I filled the pot to the top and prayed, "God, You turned water into wine? Can you please turn this water into coffee so we can help warm these people up." When we started serving the coffee from the pot, the coffee came out pure black, not watery at all. We filled the pot again to the 30-cup mark. The coffee came out black, again, not watery at all. That day was the first time I ever got a compliment for "my coffee." No one has complimented me on my coffee since then, either.

"Just before supper, one of the patrons wanted to donate five dollars. I sent him to the store to buy more coffee. Before we added the new coffee, we added water a third time. By then all the men had been told about the miracle. They were the ones that asked for the pot to be filled the third time. The hot water came out lighter than tea. The need had been supplied, and there was no more need for a miracle."

Everything God has is ours, if we would only ask. If we truly understand what a generous steward God is toward us, we could not hope but show that generosity toward others with our money and with grace. Even if we are not wealthy like the prodigal's father, even when we seemingly have nothing to give, He just wants us to be willing to be made willing, like my uncle Steve, as he opened the mission to people he couldn't even begin to relate to. We are witnesses of God's love to this world. How are we reflecting His image?

My uncle showed mercy to these people, but God wanted to give them more than mercy; God showed them, and my uncle, grace. God wants to do the same with you. I challenge you to choose not only mercy, but grace.