

We're on a launching pad

Mark 9:30-37

A Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

One of the largest mega-churches in the US is Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church, based in Houston, Texas. It averages 45,000 attendees a week. Think of that. The congregation got so big that they had to buy a basketball area and redo it so they would have space for all these people in a couple of services. Who knows how many millions listen to him on TV.

What is his appeal? It's the gospel of affirmation, the power of love, the importance of having a positive attitude, and the like. All is grace. It really sells.

To be sure, they use the Bible and many of the good Christian words – grace, love, faith, hope, encouragement. And yet something is off. We struggle to put our finger on it. Why is this so close to the gospel message, and yet it's different?

It isn't just Joel Osteen who preaches this message. A very different kind of Christian, the South African Anglican Bishop, Bishop Desmond Tutu (1931-2021), the famous anti-apartheid and human rights activist, preached grace, all is grace. In his book, *God is not a Christian*, he wrote, and in his preaching, he said: "The Lord has no enemies. All is grace."

There are pastors in every denomination today who preach this. If you go to church visiting these days, you can easily find preachers of all denominations – Lutheran, Catholic, Episcopalian, Baptist, Methodist, etc., preaching an "all is grace" message.

Years ago, a seminary professor posted a sign on his door: "God is nice, we are nice, isn't that nice." He wasn't affirming it; he was mocking it.

Christians aren't the only ones who preach grace. Other religions do, too. In Buddhism grace comes in the help of the Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be), who assists ordinary people on the upward path leading to the oneness of Nirvana. All is grace.

And confusion about grace is not just a modern problem. The early church almost went under because many preachers started preaching: All is grace!

When the church's message becomes the idea of grace, the idea of love, then the Gospel is lost because the Gospel is something different.

Here in the Mark 9 text for today Jesus calls the Twelve together and says to them: "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). If you go to the next chapter about Jesus blessing children, it is said: "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Mark 10:13-16).

We hear that and misunderstand it to be saying: "Be innocent like a child." But that's not what is meant.

Remember that in the text for today, it's all about big contrasts: He who is first must be last, he who is least is the master, he who loses his life will find it. There's a different kind of thinking going on here. Where does this come from?

In a book called *Centuries of Childhood*, the author, Paul Aries, showed that our idea of childhood is only about four hundred years old. Before that, and that includes in the Bible, children were regarded more like miniature adults who needed discipline and guidance, to be sure, but there was little basic difference between children and adults.

In the Seventeenth Century John Locke talked about how we are born as a blank slate and from that we have the debate over nature and nurture. How does a child develop? Does nature or nurture matter more?

In the Eighteenth Century, the French philosopher Rousseau talked about the primitive innocence and the savage who was pure and all of that kind of thing. Realize how late in human history that is.

In the Nineteenth Century there was Dickens who wrote about the terrible suffering of children, and the same was said in Russia by Dostoyevsky.

In the Twentieth Century, the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget described four stages of development of children and how they learn. In one experiment he poured equal amounts of water into two glasses of different height, one tall and narrow. It was only at a certain age, perhaps seven, that a child will begin to see that it doesn't mean there is more water in the tall glass, but that there equal. It's a matter of developing perception.

The point is that when we read: "You have to become like a child" we read into the text our modern ideas of developmental psychology. It's not saying not that you have to become childlike in terms of developmental psychology.

On the contrary, it simply means that the child is helpless, and like a slave, caught. Unless you are like that – like the child, like the slave, unless you are the one who lets the Lord be Lord, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

It's an entirely different way of thinking.

What is our situation? I'm O.K., you're O.K., all is grace? No, not the gospel of affirmation, but the gospel of salvation.

Our situation is that we are caught in a problem, as the Small Catechism puts it in the Second Article of the Creed: "We are caught by sin, death, and the power of the devil." Sin is that which captures us, which renders us helpless, enslaved.

Thankfully, the ever-popular hymn, "Amazing Grace," testifies to this: "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." I'm not O.K., you're not O.K., but we have been found, healed, restored.

The same is true for "How Great Thou Art," as the third stanza says: "But when I think that God, his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in, That on the cross my burden gladly bearing He bled and died to take away my sin." He paid our debt. He bought us out of slavery.

I am the one who has been redeemed by what Jesus Christ did on the cross. I was helpless and he took me out of that and gave me life. As Paul says in Romans 5:8: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

It's not "all is grace" or even "grace alone," but by grace alone, through faith alone, by Christ alone, in the cross alone. It is this specific. It is something outside of us, in spite of us, and he does it.

Recall that picture of the hand reaching down to grab us. It's not a grace we meet half-way. It's not that we have to reach up to grab the heavenly hand that is reaching down to save us. No, rather, the Lord grabs us, apart from "anything we are, think, say, and do" (Smalcald 3/3/36; Tappert 309).

That is why infant Baptism is the perfect example of faith and salvation. It's all the Lord's doing. The Lord reaches down in the waters of Baptism and as Luther writes: "snatches us from the jaws of the devil" (Large Catechism, IV Baptism, 83; Tappert 446). Therefore, we are sure, and therefore we are saved.

That means that the gospel of affirmation is off, an imposter gospel. It's not deep enough. It doesn't really address the problem we have. We're not O.K. "No one is righteous, no not one" (Romans 3:10).

And because of him and how he has come down to rescue us, our situation is we have been set on a launching pad. The future is what it is really about.

What we have to be right about is: What about being launched into that future which God is giving us? That is stated in Hebrews 13:14 (paraphrase): "Here we have no abiding city because we are looking forward to that which God is giving us." And in Philippians 3:20 (paraphrase): "Our commonwealth is not here but in the future which he is giving us."

We are exiles and pilgrims, as it says in 1 Peter 2:11: We are "aliens and exiles" in this world, and we are launched into the future he is giving us.

Amazing grace.

Amen