



***"Prayer Turned Horizontal"***

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In the early 60s no one in Americus, Georgia would have guessed that ten miles up in the road in Plains a peanut farmer was destined to become the President of the United States. Nor would they have cared.

Americus was caught in the throes of the civil rights movement. Segregation in the old South was under attack. Now there were rumors of a court-ordered integration of the public schools. Lots of folks were scared and angry during these turbulent times in Americus, Georgia.

About that time a group of northern pacifists invaded Sumter County. They built the *Koinonia Camp* where blacks and whites could live in harmony. But the locals referred to it as a Communist commune. When the children of those pacifists attended the local schools they were cruelly taunted, pushed down stairs, stuffed into lockers, and beaten up. Most of these white kids from the commune couldn't take it and transferred to the black schools in Americus.

But Greg was made of tougher stuff. One of his ancestors had been a Yankee soldier in the Civil War. He walked away from the awful carnage of that war sickened and vowing that his family would never again take part in any violence. From that disheartened soldier's vow flowed an unbroken line of descendants committed to pacifism.

But, though Greg was a pacifist like his fathers before him, it didn't mean that he was a weakling. When his high school classmates taunted him with cruel words, he refused to retaliate. When he was pushed down the stairs or shoved into lockers he picked himself up and silently walked away. When a gang of bullies caught him alone on the baseball field, he stood rigid and tall, his arms behind his back with a balled fist shoved tightly against the palm of his other hand, ready to take their blows with stoic resolve. That gang of budding rednecks would have beaten Greg half to death if a teacher hadn't rescued him.

Deanie watched this brutality toward the *Koinonia Camp* kids with sadness and guilt. Her dad was an elder at the Presbyterian Church. A man of uncommon character and bravery, he stood against the culture of racism. He urged his all-white church to open its doors and arms to African Americans. With quiet conviction, he spoke out against the fear and hatred that had gripped so many people in Americus. It caused him to lose friends and almost cost him his job. But you couldn't expect a high school kid like Deanie to be as brave as her Presbyterian elder daddy. Though she felt sorry for these pacifist kids from the commune, she watched silently while they were bullied.

But 41 years later, as plans were being made for a class reunion, Deanie still remembered Greg. Now a committed and spirit-filled Christian, she had a strange dream. As she wrestled with its meaning she knew that God was speaking to her about how she had stood in silence while Greg was brutalized. As she talked to other former classmates she discovered

that they too felt ashamed that they didn't stand up for Greg and the other kids from the *Koinonia Camp*.

So 41 years after the Americus High School class of '65 had graduated, Deanie organized a letter writing campaign. Greg, now a real estate agent in West Virginia, picked up the first letter at a rural post office. It was from Deanie, asking his forgiveness for the way her classmates had treated him, and for the way she had stood silently by. Greg sat in his car and read the letter. As he later drove down the road, the pain that had been bottled up inside all those years came bubbling up. He pulled over to the side of the road and cried like a baby. Over the next several days he received other letters begging for his forgiveness. A few weeks later Greg came to that class reunion, welcomed and embraced by those who had broken his heart as a high school student.

As Deanie shared that story with me last Sunday afternoon her voice cracked with deep emotion and I wiped away my own tears. Is there anything more precious than redemption? Is there anything more powerful than reconciliation?

This past week I haven't been able to get Deanie's story out of my mind. I think back to the beginning of our series on effective warrior prayers last Sunday. We talked about the *Lord's Prayer* as the perfect prayer. But we didn't focus much on the fact that at the heart of Jesus' prayer was the petition, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Or the fact that Jesus does not, in the original manuscripts of the Scripture, end with "For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory." (That was added later to the Anglican liturgy by order of King Henry the Eighth, and then put in the King James Version by royal decree). Instead Jesus ends the Lord's Prayer with a warning in Matthew 6:14&15:

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your father will not forgive your sins."

Jesus is giving a powerful principle here:

**If grace received isn't grace given, then grace is illusionary.**

Grace is undeserved favor. And the Lord's Prayer is all about beggars coming to God with open hands and asking for grace. It begins by calling God "Our Father..." We don't deserve that, but by grace we have been adopted into his family. We ask for his kingdom to come in this crazy, mixed-up world. We don't deserve that either. He could destroy this corrupt world, and all of us sinners in it, and be justified in doing it. We beg for "daily bread" we don't deserve, and for forgiveness we can't earn, and for deliverance from temptation we can't overcome and a devil we can't defeat on our own. This *Lord's Pattern Prayer* is, from beginning

to end, a frantic cry for undeserved favor. And our Father lavishes us with goodness in spite of ourselves.

But what happens when we receive grace from our Father, but don't give it back to our family, friends, and neighbors? Again, the fourth petition in Matthew 6:12: "Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors." Jesus connects grace received from God to grace given to others. He even warns us in verse 15, that if we don't forgive the sins of others, our heavenly Father won't forgive our sins.

Do you want to have an effective prayer life? Then remember that prayers are hindered by broken relationships. Look at what Jesus says in Matthew 5:23&24:

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift."

We can't come to the altar asking for more grace from God without going to our brother and sister, with whom we have a broken relationship, and giving them the same grace we are begging from our Lord. The Apostle gives a practical warning in I Peter 3:7 when he says to husbands that they should treat their wives with grace "...so that nothing will hinder your prayers."

Jesus begins the training of his twelve disciples with his *Sermon on the Mount* and the Lord's Prayer. He ends their three-year training in the Upper Room. He has gathered them together for his final meal before his crucifixion. Everything he says in that Upper Room discourse with his disciples has the compelling urgency of a deathbed confession. But nothing is more critical than his words in John 13:33&34:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

This is not really a *new* commandment. It is as old as the *Old* Testament. Actually, it captures the two great commandments of Moses: that we love God and our neighbors with everything we've got. I think that you could render this word *new* as *fresh*. Sometimes old truths need to be restated in a *fresh* new way. We've heard certain truths so often that they hardly make a dent in our spirit. We shrug and say, "Of course, we are supposed to love on another. That's what God's people do." But that's not what they *always* do. That's not what the disciples were doing that night as they jostled each other for the highest positions in Christ's kingdom. And 2,000 years later his disciples are still at it. We

need a fresh understanding of this principle: **If grace received isn't grace given, then grace is illusionary.** Let's unpack John 13:33&34:

## 1. Grace Received

Jesus says, "*As I have loved you, so you must love one another...*" I never understood the wonder of that love until I was introduced to the biblical grace as it was unpacked from Scripture by the Protestant Reformers. They summarized God's grace (the way Jesus loves us) with five truths:

First of all, God knows the truth about me: **there's not a single molecule of my being that is not corrupted by sin.** Before his grace apprehended me, I was dead in my sins. I had eyes that could not see, ears that could not hear, and a heart that could not feel apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Since I have been redeemed I must still say with the prophet Isaiah that even my "righteousness is like filthy rags" next to God's holiness. No matter how sanctified I become, I will end my life saying what St. Paul said at the end of his days: "I am the chief of sinners."

My wretched condition makes the second truth "amazing grace": **God has chosen to love me unconditionally.** He doesn't love me for what I am, or what he foresees that I might be. Nor will he ever reject me for what I am not. As Paul writes in the first lines of his letter to the Ephesians, he loves me for no other reason than it gives him pleasure and brings him glory.

It only gets better with the third truth: **he loves me specifically.** He loves me uniquely, just as I am, the total package with all its weaknesses, weirdness, eccentricities, and quirky behavior. He wrote *my* name in the Lamb's Book of Life before he ever spangled the night skies with a single star. He died for me specifically, not just for a nameless, faceless mass of humanity. He called me to himself by name. The fact that he loves me like this exhilarates and humbles me at the same time.

And it gets even better with the fourth truth: **his love for me is irresistible.** I wasn't dragged kicking and screaming without a choice in the matter. When the Holy Spirit opened my eyes, I wanted to run into the arms of Jesus. In the words of St. John, I loved him because "he first loved me." Forty-five years after he found me I find his gracious love more irresistible than ever.

But it's the fifth truth that astounds me most: **his love will persevere to the end.** Jesus said, "No one can pluck my sheep from my hands." St. Paul put it another way: "Those he justified, he *will* glorify." I know that "he who began a good work in me will carry it on to the day of completion." If today I have the most sinful day of my life, I can know that when I put my head on the pillow tonight, he will not love me any less than he did this morning. And if I have the best day of my life, he will not love me any more tonight than he did before time began.

When Jesus says, "As I have loved you..." this is the love he is describing. Do you know this love? Has it gripped your soul and transformed your life? Jesus says that, if it changes your life it must change your relationships with others.

## 2. Grace Given

Jesus goes on in John 13:34, "As I have loved you, *so you must love one another...*" Jesus is saying that it is not enough to claim a vertical relationship with God. That same love relationship must become horizontal in the same way with others. .

I remember recently counseling an angry, old man. He was proud of the fact that he embraced the great doctrines of the Protestant Reformation. He had been raised in a Dutch Reformed Church. With tears he would rattle off the five points of Calvin (the five truths about Christ's love that I just shared with you). He would argue endlessly with those who didn't buy into his doctrines of Sovereign Grace. But this man was also estranged from his children. He hasn't talked to one daughter for more than five years. His wife could barely tolerate him. He has created controversy in every church he has ever attended.

It was in struggling with this man that I challenged him with Jesus' words in John 13:34&35. I asked him if the five truths that I have shared with you captured the love of Christ for his elect. Without hesitation he said, "Yes!" Then I asked him, "If you were to love others the same way, wouldn't that require that you love them with those same five points?" I then explained what that means in practical terms.

You would have to recognize that **not a single molecule of their lives is without the corruption of sin.** You won't be shocked, or disappointed, or disillusioned, or angry when others mess up. You will accept them for who they are: sinners, like you, desperately in need of God's grace and your love.

As a result, you will have no other choice but to **love them unconditionally**. You won't love them for who they are, what they do for you, or what you hope that they might become. You won't reject them if they don't measure up.

You will love them with **definite or specific grace**. It is easy to love all Christians in a general way. It is quite another thing to love specific people for what they specifically are, in spite of their particular weaknesses, weirdness, eccentricities, and shortcomings. A roommate in college once said to me, "I love you as fellow Christian, but I hate you as a person." Forty-two years later, I'm still trying to figure that one out.

Your love will demonstrate **irresistible grace**. Such unconditional love will draw them irresistibly to you, and then irresistibly to the Christ who has filled you with such irresistible love. It will have an irresistible force drawing others, who witness this love, to the same Christ.

And this grace turned horizontal will **persevere to the end**. It will never forsake or abandon its commitments or covenants. It won't run from those who frustrate, reject those who irritate, or wall off those who disappoint. In the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians, this love "...always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres..." In short, it never fails.

If these five points of grace encapsulate the way Jesus loves us, then with these same five points we must love others. That day my old Calvinist friend saw that he couldn't receive this love from his heavenly father without giving the same love to his wife, daughters, and fellow Christians. Nor can any of us.

The truth is, my old Calvinist friend also discovered a supreme and humbling irony that day: the way he treated others was diametrically opposed to his theology about the way God loved him: He didn't apply his doctrine of **total depravity** to his daughters. He expected them to be better than that. When they didn't measure up, he was shocked, disappointed and disillusioned. He refused them **unconditional grace**. Because they didn't measure up to his expectations, he cut off his love to them. He believed in **definite atonement**, but he didn't love them for who they uniquely and specifically were. I could only respond to them if they would become the people he imagined they should be. His perverted love was anything but **irresistible in its grace**. It repelled them, their mother, and most everyone else who came into contact with him. Forget about **persevering grace**. He cut them off emotionally and then spatially when they failed to please him.

### 3. Illusionary Grace

Jesus ends his *new* commandment with these explosive words in verse thirty-five: “By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Our horizontal relationships with people are the proof of our vertical relationship with God.

If we can’t love others the way Christ loves us, then maybe our faith is **illusionary**. There is the frightening possibility that it is not real. The writer of this gospel later warns us in I John 4:8, “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” If it is not illusionary, it is certainly **impotent**. Love that lacks the power to transform our relationships will never convince the watching world that it is *divine* love. Therefore it becomes **irrelevant** to those outside the Church. Unless our relationship with Jesus Christ has the power to transform marriages, families, and every other relationship it will be rejected as illusionary, impotent, and irrelevant. All men will *only* believe that Christ has made a difference in our lives as disciples when they see a difference in our relationships with one another.

Effective *warrior* prayers begin with utter humility. Deanie discovered as a high school student how hard it is to be a warrior in the face of satanic hostility. She kept quiet when she should have given grace. But my friend Deanie also understood that she could come to her Father in heaven and receive forgiveness for that. But she didn’t stop with receiving God’s grace. She knew that she had to find Greg (and even his family members who were affected by Greg’s pain) and ask their forgiveness. It wasn’t easy to track Greg down, and organize that letter writing campaign. But she persisted as a warrior woman strengthened and transformed by the Lord’s *Pattern* Prayer.

Deanie lived out Christ’s *new* commandment, and Greg (and a lot of other people) saw the reality of Christ’s transforming power in the life of a disciple. How about you? Do you want to receive the fullness of God’s loving grace? Then ask yourself a critical question that will shape the effectiveness of your prayer life: Who do I need to seek out and love in a *new* and gracious way? More importantly, to quote Nike, go out and “Just do it.”