

That's Not in the Bible Sermon Series
There, But for the Grace of God, Go I
Oct. 13, 2019
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We continue our sermon series this morning on popular Christian sayings. We've been looking at maxims like "Everything happens for a reason" and "God doesn't give you more than you can handle," to see exactly how beneficial these statements actually are. We've found that some of them convey an understanding of God's character that may not be helpful for the person to whom we're saying it. We've also found that none of these sayings are in the Bible, even though the Bible is often invoked when they are said, as if that makes the statement true. It's hard to argue with someone who starts a sentence with, "Well, you know, the Bible says..."

Today's saying, "There, but for the grace of God, go I" sounds biblical, but it's also not in the Bible. The popular legend is that this statement originated in the 16th century. An Englishman by the name of John Bradford was a strong voice in the Protestant revolution in England, and found himself on the wrong side of the argument with Queen Mary I. You don't want to get on the Queen's bad side, and Bradford was imprisoned in the Tower of London. As he watched some of his compatriots being marched toward the gallows, he is quoted as saying, "There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford." And Bradford lived happily ever after. Just kidding! He was burned at the stake. So much for God's grace, right?

The phrase was later popularized by Winston Churchill, who said it in relation to Sir Stafford Cripps, a pompous and egocentric contemporary. Churchill said of Cripps, in a commentary on Cripps' sense of self-importance, "There, but for the grace of God, goes God." So, we have two historical uses of our phrase, both in very different contexts and with very different meanings. When we say, "There, but for the grace of God, go I," what do we mean?

I posed this question to some friends recently and one of them hit the nail on the head when she said, "I think it means, 'Gosh, I'm lucky I'm not like that person'." Exactly! That's often the meaning behind the phrase. Usually, the phrase is meant to be a way of expressing gratitude to God for the way in which God's grace has been at work in our lives. It's a way of recognizing that we're not where we are because of our own wisdom or excellence or righteousness, but because of God's grace. But often the phrase is used as much as a judgmental comment about the other person as it is a testimony to God's grace. "Gosh, I'm lucky I'm not like that person."

A good example is our scripture for today. Two men go into the temple to pray. One is a Pharisee, a prominent religious leader in the community. Pharisees often get a bad rap in the Gospels, and that's because they deserve it...or at least this guy does. While in the temple, he prays a prayer of thanksgiving to God that he is not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or tax collectors. Funny, he didn't mention pompous windbags or arrogant elitists. You can almost see the man looking down his nose at the tax collector and saying, "There, but for the grace of God and my own general awesomeness, go I."

The other person is a tax collector, a profession that symbolized the lowest of the low in Jewish society. Tax collectors were Jews who worked for the Roman government, collecting taxes from their fellow Jews to give to their Roman oppressors. Tax collectors and sinners are often lumped together in scripture to signify the worst people in society, which is exactly where Jesus spent most of his time. Hold onto that thought.

What this story highlights for us in regard to our statement today is the judgment that can be inherent in it. At its purest, the cliché is not really about the other person, but is about how God has been active in the speaker's life to keep them from harm and self-destruction. But this statement is rarely said with the purest of intentions. Instead, it is often said in a way that carries with it an odor of judgment about the person to whom the speaker is being compared. That's because the cliché is often said in a vertical direction, spoken from "up top" about someone "down below," which is the case in the scripture passage.

To highlight the superficiality of this discrepancy, I saw a cartoon once of two homeless men sitting on curb asking for donations. Across the street, a limo pulls up and a wealthy man steps out, cellphone attached to his ear, trailed by a team of personal assistants rushing him off to his next appointment. The rich man looks discombobulated as he hurries to the office building. One homeless man looks at the other and says, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." It's funny because that's not how it's supposed to happen. The rich man is supposed to look down on the beggar, not the other way around.

What this statement does is create a sense of social and spiritual stratification between the speaker and the object of comparison. The fact that there's an object of comparison in the first place should raise a red flag for us about the efficacy of this statement. True faith never expresses itself over and against someone else. The speaker is often someone who's "made it" in life, and they are speaking about someone less fortunate or less motivated than them. What this statement does is create a spiritual buffer zone between me, the recipient of God's grace, and that other person.

But here's the thing: to say, "There, but for the grace of God, go I" implies that the other person isn't covered by God's grace, that they have somehow fallen outside of the perimeter of God's reach. It conveys the message that the other person – the drug addict, the homeless man, the tax collector – isn't worthy of receiving God's grace because of the condition that they are in. Maybe they are being punished by God for something they've done. Or, the statement implies that the other person has been offered God's grace but refused it, thus landing them in their current predicament, while you, the much wiser and more faithful person, did indeed accept the offer, which is why you are up here and they are down there. So, either God doesn't love them enough to offer them grace, or they don't love God enough to accept it. We exalt ourselves with this statement, instead of letting God exalt us through our humility and acknowledgment of our own sinfulness. "Gosh, I'm lucky I'm not like that person."

But we are. Aren't we? The Pharisee tried to offer evidence of how pious he was, unlike the rogues and adulterers around him. But God doesn't pro-rate sins, and the Pharisee was just as much in need of God's grace as the tax collector. Often times, the only difference between those of us "up here" and the folks "down there" is that the consequences of their sins are more visible. You can hide things like pride and greed and prejudice really well, to the point that you think you no longer need God's grace because you've made it, you're in the spiritual clear. But God's grace is not a flu shot, a one-and-done inoculation against sin; it's an immunization we have to take daily, because every day we are susceptible to being infected by the temptations that separate us from God and from each other.

That separation is what is at the heart of this statement, and what we must fight against when we feel tempted to say it. Remember when I said earlier that it's important to note that Jesus spent his time with tax collectors and sinners? Those are often the very people to whom we compare ourselves when using this cliché. Jesus was the embodiment of the grace of God, a living, breathing grace dispenser, taking God's love and mercy into those places that most of us

are too afraid to go. So, if Jesus is with them, then God's grace is there, as well. There are no limits to the places God's grace will go and the people with whom God's grace rests. We may like to think that there is; it's a lot easier for us to worship a God who hates all the same people we do. But in God's eyes, there is no comparison. Each of us is a child of God, and regardless of our circumstances and our choices and our sins, God loves us. We are all the recipients of God's grace.

If we take that to heart, it changes how we respond to those we see as below us. Rather than creating a buffer zone by distancing ourselves from them, we are called to close the gap by reaching out, becoming an extension of God's grace to those who need to be reminded that God still loves them, even if they feel no one else does. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are commissioned to be dispensers of grace in this world, going to the tax collectors and sinners and strangers and the forgotten and saying, "You and me, we're a lot alike. God loves both of us. God's grace is for both of us." Instead of saying, "There, but for the grace of God, go I," maybe we should ask ourselves, "How can I be a grace dispenser to this other person less fortunate than me?" No comparison there. That's not praying, "Gosh, I'm lucky I'm not like that person." That's praying, "God, thank you that I AM like other people, even those different from me."

Comparison may be human nature as a measurement of our progress, but that gets us in trouble when it comes to our faith journey, leading us to say things like, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." So maybe the best comparison we can use is not with someone else, but with ourselves. As we move forward in faith, running our own race one halting step at a time, lifting ourselves up by putting someone else down – even unintentionally – may actually be more of a hurdle than a help. Instead of comparing ourselves to someone else, we are best served by reciting the old slave prayer used by Dr. Martin Luther King at the end of his sermons: "O God, I ain't what I ought to be, and I ain't what I'm gonna be, but by your Grace, I ain't what I used to be." Thanks to the grace of God.