

# “The Essentials”

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.

## Essential #5

Grace: The gift between God's  
goodness and love.

Romans 5:12-21 (Today's English Version)

*Sin came into the world through one man, and his sin brought death with it. As a result, death has spread to the whole human race because everyone has sinned. There was sin in the world before the Law was given; but where there is no law, no account is kept of sins. But from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, death ruled over all human beings, even over those who did not sin in the same way that Adam did when he disobeyed God's command.*

*Adam was a figure of the one who was to come. But the two are not the same, because God's free gift is not like Adam's sin. It is true that many people died because of the sin of that one man. But God's grace is much greater, and so is his free gift to so many people through the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ. And there is a difference between God's gift and the sin of one man. After the one sin, came the judgment of "Guilty;" but after so many sins, comes the undeserved gift of "Not Guilty!"*

*It is true that through the sin of one man death began to rule because of that one man. But how much greater is the result of what was done by the one man, Jesus Christ! All who receive God's abundant grace and are freely put right with him will rule in life through Christ*

*So then, as the one sin condemned all people, in the same way the one righteous act sets all people free and gives them life. And just as all people were made sinners as the result of the disobedience of one man, in the same way they will all be put right with God as the result of the obedience of the one man.*

*Law was introduced in order to increase wrongdoing, but where sin increased, God's grace increased much more. So then, just as sin ruled by means of death, so also God's grace rules by means of righteousness, leading us to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

In our examination of the 12 essential beliefs that undergird the Christian faith we come to the concept of Grace. Grace is usually defined as God's kindness towards people who are unworthy of it, a good definition as far as it will go. But grace is a mysterious quality exercised by God, a bridge between His righteousness (or goodness) and His love. Grace is a quality that must needs be experienced rather than defined to be understood. If you will, grace is much more a matter of the heart than of the head.

On her fifteenth birthday, in 1752, Anna arose from the cot in her cell of the Benedictine convent in the heart of Innsbruck, Austria, with a heavy heart. A timid girl, she loved the ordered life of the convent and longed to remain a part of its familiar pattern of work, prayer, and simplicity. As she made her way to the chapel for prayer, she gazed lovingly in the grey dawn-light at the protecting walls and the inviting gardens. She hardly had any memory of the frightening world outside, having come to the convent as a child when her mother died in childbirth not long after Anna's second birthday. Today her father, a wealthy merchant with a *chalet* between the town and the Alps, would arrive to take her with himself and into a new life. She did not want to go.

For that reason, after the brief service she tiptoed to the office of the abbess of the convent.

"Mother, may I speak to you for a moment?"

"My child, come in! Of course you may!"

"Mother, on this my fifteenth birthday, I ask that you would grant me a request."

"What is it, my child?"

"Mother, I want to stay here at the convent! I feel called by God to serve Him here as one of the sisters."

"My child, I would like nothing better than to have you here with us. But you may not stay merely because you fear the outside world. Before you come here to stay you must first experience grace."

With that the Mother Superior ended the conversation.

As she rode out from the town with her father in his carriage, Anna gaped in wonder at the majestic Alps in whose shadow she had grown up but had never seen. She had expected a harsh reality outside the convent walls, and was carried away by the splendor of it all—the mountains, the fields sprayed with Edelweiss, and the people; their costumes, their shapes, and especially their faces. A wave of pure joy came over her that washed away her fear, even as the smile of her father assured her that protection and safety had not left her when she left the familiar walls.

"*Charis*", the Greek word for "grace" has several variations of meaning (for instance it was a common greeting), but it's root meaning is "joy"

Anna's father wished to offer his daughter all of the sights, sounds, and experiences that she had missed in her cloistered life. The following month was a whirl of new tastes, foreign to the bread, water, and vegetables of the convent. There was a trip to Milan to experience the opera and another to Vienna to hear mass accompanied

by the famed boy's choir. The spiritually sensitive girl perceived God's hand behind these human achievements, and it was pure joy for her. Upon returning to Innsbruck she went to visit the abbess.

"Child, you are radiant! Evidently the world outside agrees with you."

"Oh Mother, you were so right not to let me be driven by my fear. Through the goodness of my earthly father I have experienced so much in the last month! However, I have found my Heavenly Father to be even more generous, insofar as He has made the music, prepared the food, and planted the mountains that have so delighted me. He lavishes all of this on both people who appreciate His handiwork and those who do not. Is not this grace? Having experienced this generosity am I not ready to take up my life's calling here?"

"Child, God's generosity is indeed the beginning of Grace, but not its end. I can well believe that it will not pain you to wait yet a while."

"Grace" also has to do with a character trait of graciousness, gentleness, and generosity

When we speak of "God's grace" we are speaking first of this character trait by which God, who is Love, is also gracious, good-humored, and generous.

It wasn't long before a cloud appeared in the firmament of Anna's joy in the form of her younger brother, Karl. Karl had always enjoyed the love and attention of his father, who had dared to raise a boy at home, though not his daughter. Karl therefore resented the attention showered upon Anna. He bided his time, though, until his father was safely away on a business trip that was expected to last for six months. Then Karl began tormenting Anna with all the timeless adolescent pranks that a boy can play on a girl. There was the salt in the sugar dish, the lacing together of Anna's boots so she would fall, and the bucket of water perched on a door that she opened. There were taunts and there was mockery regarding her dress, her appearance, and her expressions.

The crowning prank, however, came from something Karl overheard from the servant who helped Anna dress as this servant spoke to the cook.

"I always tries to do her up pretty so's she can catch the eye of some young nobleman at mass, so this morning Miss asks me about that, and I tells her."

"So, what did she say?"

"She says that her heart is set on returning to the convent and there ain't no need to go catching the eye of any young man."

The next morning well before breakfast, Karl prepared a white card with backwards letters in slow-drying paint. This card he glued to Anna's seat at the table, so the letters would be sure to transfer to her rump.

She wore a tasteful dark dress to mass that morning, so the letters stood out as if they had been lights in the darkness—though Anna was unaware of their existence. What she was aware of were strange things that seemed to follow her—giggles, titterings, and an occasional young man running past her, stopping in front and puckering up his lips and blowing in a rude way. It wasn't until she returned home and changed that she found Karl's lettering. It said simply, "Kiss Me." She wanted to die.

Sin is infectious.

Once Adam had tasted selfishness and had acted in selfishness towards another person, it was *naturally* impossible for the other person to avoid reacting in selfishness also.

Anna was, of course, too much of a Christian girl to seek revenge upon her brother. Instead, her manner toward him became cold and aloof. She demonstrated in her attitude that she held Karl and his pettiness in utter contempt. Although she never said a word about it, her manner showed without any doubt that she considered herself so much superior to him that his taunts and pranks were beneath her response.

Only on her next visit to the convent was Anna able to unburden herself of the sting of embarrassment and the anger that her brother's mockery produced. The Abbess listened calmly and then asked Anna in her direct way:

"Tell me honestly, Anna, what is your opinion of your brother?"

"He is an empty-headed fool!"

"Listen to this: 'You have heard that it was said to those of old—You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment—But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says—You fool!—shall be liable to the hell of fire.'" There was a deathly silence following the Abbess's reading from the Gospel.

**“But, Mother, what about Karl?”**

**“Child, Karl did not have the Gospel read to him just now.”**

Did you wonder why in Romans it talks about Adam’s sin and not Eve’s?

Adam was the only one who had received a command from God, therefore his guilt was indisputable.

**Anna had been caught red-handed in her own contempt, and she felt the rush of blood into her face.**

**Now she had not been shamed by someone else’s prank; she had been shamed by herself.**

Guilt is an essential precondition of the *experience* of Grace

We must not only *feel* guilty, but we must become aware that we *are* guilty before God of behaving in a loveless way.

**“Mother, what can I do?”**

**“Seek God’s forgiveness, Child. You will find him to be forgiving.”**

**And He was. Anna made her way to confession, and when the priest declared that in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit her sins were forgiven, she not only felt that she was forgiven, she had a deep bedrock conviction that she was. She left the church believing that in the experience of God’s mercy she had finally experienced grace.**

But although the conviction of God’s forgiveness remained through the following days and weeks, she came to doubt that she had indeed experienced grace. This was because things did not change. Karl was still a hateful, mocking pest, and he had learned with unflinching expertise how to get to Anna. It seemed that every day she had a new matter to bring before the confessional, and her contempt was so regularly stoked that it became habitual. She was so wrapped up in struggling with herself that the familiar words of Jesus read in church on Sunday hit her as if for the first time: “I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven.”

**“Lord, the only prayer I want to pray for Karl is that you would take him to be with you.”**

The Law (God’s rules and principles) does not create sin, but it makes sin *accountable*, increasing our awareness of guilt. In that way a moral code actually acts to *increase* the power and effect of sinfulness.

**After that mass, Anna knelt gazing up at the crucifix.**

**“Lord, I have become so wrapped up in hate, guilt, and sin, that I will never be worthy of the convent. You are so good. I wish you would become my righteousness. But how can one person’s goodness be transferred to someone else? Is it that your good deeds are like a storehouse of treasure that you can apply to someone else’s errors, in the way a wealthy person can choose to cover someone else’s debt?”** To her surprise, Anna heard the Lord speaking to her mind’s ear.

**“Sort of. (The Lord spoke in answer to her question) Rather, think of a mother asking her daughter to wash the dishes. The daughter did not, but the sister willingly did instead. The sister’s righteousness would cover the daughter’s sin. For now, don’t try to love Karl yourself; just remember that I do. Remember that I have forgiven you and that every day as you seek my forgiveness anew, offer forgiveness to your brother.”**

Mercy is an essential part of the experience of Grace

The *experience* of Grace involves receiving mercy in such a way that we are empowered and encouraged to offer mercy to others.

Not long afterward, when out searching for a particular kind of large and thorny briar for Anna to sit on, Karl got rained on. He caught cold, and cold progressed to pneumonia. Partly out of guilt, partly out of stubborn determination, and (secretly) out of joy at seeing him suffer divine retribution, Anna determined to be the one who nursed him back to health. He was delirious much of the time, but one day his eyes cleared and Karl said simply: “Thank you, Anna. I’m sorry.”

She was surprised at the joy that flooded her heart as she said, “You are forgiven.” She was surprised at the sense of gratitude that from that point onwards brought her to enjoy nursing her brother and being with him.

They were even able to relive his pranks with enjoyment, knowing that these were now in the unrepeatable past. Deep, lifechanging gratitude towards God is the sure sign that we have experienced grace. A bitter, complaining spirit in a Christian is a sure sign that grace has soured.

**“Mother, now that Karl is better I still want to be admitted to the convent, but in a new way. I used to want to live here because I feared the outside world or because I felt that the sin of others would soil me. Now I simply feel secure in knowing that God loves me when I can’t love him and loves for me when I can’t love others. I want to be here, not because I feel an obligation, but because I truly desire to give my life to serve God.”**

**“Child, you have indeed experienced grace. Welcome to your calling.”**

Because of the abiding gratitude that comes from an experience of Grace, that experience will always set us on the path of righteousness.

Because it produces in us the desire to please God rather than ourselves

Grace, then, is the mysterious action by which God’s Love satisfies God’s righteousness by including us in both.