

## The Spiritual Practice of Service

"Whoever wants to be great among you," Jesus said, "will be your servant" (Matthew 20:26). He didn't mean that we put in time, rack up points, throw off the rags of a servant, and put on the mantle of greatness. Jesus meant that our minds—our ways of thinking—are transformed (Romans 12:2). We come to understand that we find greatness in God's kingdom by becoming the least for the sake of others. We find our highest worship in the ways we serve others in the name of Jesus.

Service as a spiritual practice is never about getting but about finding the best way to give away our lives, as Jesus gave his. Our service should come from our hearts based on what we have already received. It's not a path to salvation but rather the response we make after receiving the saving grace of God through Jesus Christ. Christian service comes naturally as a grateful response for God's gracious gift. And we serve, quite simply, because people have physical, emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual needs. Service is indifferent to the question of who is deserving and who is not.

When our gratitude as followers of Christ grows, our response grows as well, and the world experiences the truth of the grace of God through Christ more fully. While we do not serve others to obtain anything for ourselves, we will gain much in terms of humility and compassion. In serving, we become more like Jesus.

**May 10**  
**Lesson 11**

## God's Grace Toward Adam, Eve, and Cain

**Focal Passage:** Genesis 3:21; 4:10-16

**Background Text:** Genesis 3:21; 4:1-16

**Purpose Statement:** To identify God's grace in the worst of our life's experiences

**Key Verse:** "The LORD God made the man and his wife leather clothes and dressed them" (Genesis 3:21).

From Revelation's images in the previous lesson of the New Jerusalem, the life-giving river, and the tree of life, with this text from Genesis, we go back to where it all began. Because the man and the woman disobeyed and ate from the tree God had told them not to eat from, God banished them from the garden of Eden so that they would not "take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever" (Genesis 3:22). It's important to hold these two ends of Scripture together, knowing that we now are somewhere between Eden and the promised place where all of creation will find its new home for eternity.

Reading Genesis 3 quickly reveals how humans messed up paradise. The man and the woman had it so good. Genesis 4 is also a heartbreaking chapter, because it reminds us of how fragile life is and how seemingly easy it is to kill something or someone. These two chapters, so early in the story of humankind's existence with God, ought to bring us to our knees, if for no other reason than we can so clearly see how easy it is to mess things up. How easy it is to sin, to take what we want in this world with little or no consideration of where we fit in this world and what we have been created to be and do.

But there is good news! The theme of the five lessons in this unit is grace. While we will look at the sin of the man



and the woman and at the horrible thing Cain did to his brother, Abel, we will not stop there. We will celebrate the overwhelming love and grace God pours out on us. Allow these ancient stories to show you how to look for and find God's grace, even in the worst of life's experiences.

### **An Act of Love and Grace**

Each of us can probably describe a time when we made a mess of things but someone came along and made it a little better. I was a Latin major in college, and Dr. Palanca was my professor. In my second year, we had a pretty significant test. I should have studied. Frankly, I was too smart for my own good and chose to do other things instead. The night before the big test, I glanced over the material and called it good.

When I looked at the questions on the test the next day, the translations to be made, and the other parts of the test, I had a sick feeling inside. I went from question to question, and I didn't have an answer for any of them. I sat for an hour, trying to carve out a little bit of sense from something in front of me that made no sense. When I turned in the test, I knew I had totally blown it.

Two days later, we got our tests back, and I looked at mine. Dr. Palanca had given me an A. I should have received an F. With a great burden on my heart and my shoulders, I went to see him for an explanation. He said, in his wonderful Italian accent, "Yes, your answers were poor. However, I know what you have done in my class and what kind of student you are, and so I gave you the grade I assumed you would have earned if something had not gotten in your way."

With a penitent heart, knowing I didn't deserve the gift, I experienced love and grace from a professor who was more interested in my life than a test. You can guess I never ignored a test again, but I also have never forgotten the gift of grace I received.

Flash back to the garden of Eden after the man and the woman had eaten from the forbidden tree. "Then they both saw clearly and knew that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made garments for themselves" (Genesis 3:7). Have you ever sewn fig leaves together? I can just imagine it was a mess and only showed how pitiful the humans' efforts were at trying to hide themselves and their sin from God. With their self-centered and disobedient decision, everything changed. I don't know what would have been worse: banishment from the garden or coming face to face with God's disappointment.

Notice, however, what God did not do. God didn't set the garden ablaze and destroy it all or get rid of the humans and start again. It might have been much easier for God simply to push the restart button and once again have a pure and holy world.

Instead, we see from God a simple but tender and incredibly caring act, even before God banished the couple from the garden. "The LORD God made the man and his wife leather clothes and dressed them" (verse 21). Like a heavenly tailor, the incredibly loving and gracious God made sure that the creatures who so horribly broke away from paradise would still be cared for and clothed in a way that would last and provide them with what they needed. It was a gracious gift from God, made without comment, to cover the shame and vulnerability of the humans.

An act of love is more than simple charity. It arises from deep in the heart and brings the possibility for forgiveness and new life. Just as we have received such acts of love and grace, we also have opportunities to extend them to others. Our loving and gracious God set the example for us.

*When have you received or extended grace in the form of an act of love?*



## An Act of Justice

Most of my work as a district superintendent in the church is enjoyable. I get to be part of celebrations, dreaming, and discernment of the direction ministry and mission should go. However, sometimes what I have to do is difficult and unpleasant.

Occasionally, I am called to have a conversation with pastors who have made messes in the church or who have failed to live according to our high standards as leaders of God's people. Frankly, the messes are easier. Usually, what has happened is what I like to refer to as the pastors "lighting a match in a room full of gas." Things blow up often because they didn't think about the consequences of saying or doing something that was unwise. They knew better but slipped, and we have to find a way to clean up the mess.

However, when pastors have true ethical breaks that call into question their basic fitness for ministry, heart-break is often the result. I once received a call of concern because a significant amount of pornography had been found on a pastor's office computer during a standard maintenance. I met with the pastor, who admitted to the practice of logging on to various pornographic websites. He had found himself going further and further into that dark part of the internet.

The hardest thing for me to hear, however, was when he said he didn't think there was any harm in what he had done. "It wasn't hurting anyone," he said. I tried to help him understand how unholy and wrong such behavior was, but he refused to take responsibility or admit it was even inappropriate.

I asked him to surrender his credentials and leave the ministry. He was angry, then scared, and then upset. I only wish he had been at all remorseful or even embarrassed. I hated to change his future and his work in such a profound

way, but I have always done my ministry by the guide of "Be kind when you can, and be just when you must."

The act that day was not one of kindness, because there was no room left for that to occur and keep faith with the laity of our church and the standard of our conduct. I had to be "just, when I must." The act of justice to remove him from ministry was important not only for our church but, in a real sense, for his own life, so that he would realize what he had given up in order to live out that behavior. We did provide counseling for him, but it had to happen outside of the covenant of called ministry. He couldn't be a pastor anymore.

Cain and Abel were sons of Adam and Eve. You probably know the story well. "Cain presented an offering to the LORD from the land's crops, while Abel presented his flock's oldest offspring with their fat. The LORD looked favorably on Abel and his sacrifice but didn't look favorably on Cain and his sacrifice. Cain became very angry and looked resentful" (Genesis 4:3-5). Scripture describes how God warned Cain about his anger and resentment and the "sin waiting at the door ready to strike! It will entice you," God told him, "but you must rule over it" (verse 7).

Cain did not master the sin waiting at the door; his anger and resentment grew to the point that it overtook him, and he "attacked his brother Abel and killed him" (verse 8). God, of course, knew what Cain had done and asked him where Abel was. "I don't know," Cain replied. "Am I my brother's guardian?" (verse 9). Then "the LORD said, 'What did you do?'" (verse 10). Again, God knew that instead of scattering seed in the field where he farmed, Cain had scattered Abel's blood there. Such a shocking and horrible thing for Cain to do, an act that most assuredly had consequences.

Can you imagine what it would be like if we were allowed, without any consequence, to take another life



any time we saw fit? We don't like the way a neighbor mows his lawn, how a coworker chews her gum, or where a fellow church member sits in the sanctuary. So does that mean we are free to kill these people? Of course not! That attitude is completely opposite to God's intention for our world. When Cain acted this way, strangely enough, God acted out of grace, to bring an act of justice to Cain.

It's important to realize that grace does not mean that everything is okay. Grace is always costly. God's grace to us through Jesus' death on the cross was grace at the highest cost. Sometimes the only way grace can come to this world is by upholding justice, as in the case of the pastor I counseled.

Perhaps it seems incredibly severe that God punished Cain by taking away his ability to farm the land. It would no longer be fertile for him to grow crops since it contained Abel's blood, and Cain would become a nomad on the earth (Genesis 4:11-12). But we need to ask what less should and could be a just response to Abel's murder by his brother? In this act of justice, Cain bore responsibility for his terrible action, just as Adam and Eve bore responsibility for disobeying God's commandment regarding the tree.

Although we will explore a second response of grace by God below, for now it's important to consider that this action by God toward Cain was the best thing possible. To have forgiven without any consequence would have changed our relationship with God forever and would have also changed the claim on us as humans to act with a sense of justice in our own lives. Enacting justice often creates space for grace to flow.

***When have you experienced God's grace to the world through an act of justice? Where in your life do you need for justice to be offered as an expression of God's care?***

## **An Act of Protection**

"String him up, boys!" As the mob decides to storm the jail in the old West dusty town, it's up to the marshal to stop their desire, not for justice, but for retribution. It's a typical theme of Western movies and television shows. I imagine I've seen dozens of brave marshals, sheriffs, deputies, or even that noble cowboy stranger keep an entire crowd away by demanding that real justice be served, that the crowd obey the silver star of the law. As a result, the mob is dispersed. "You all go on home now, y'hear? This ain't the way we are going to act in my town!"

Isn't it peculiar that, so often, the guilty one needs protection from others wanting to carry out what they believe is justice by their own hands? In our justice system, when someone is accused of a crime, or when someone is convicted of a crime, an incredible amount of effort is made to ensure that the guilty person is kept safe until and while the punishment is administered. Occasionally, we hear of instances when someone is murdered in prison; but as horrible as someone's acts may be, the entire institution of the justice system breaks down if that person is harmed simply because someone decides he or she has the right to inflict his or her own level of punishment.

Cain was inconsolable when he heard the justice placed upon his life by God. Yes, he had killed his brother. Yes, that was horrible. But Cain imagined the consequence, not of his actions, but of God's decree! "My punishment is more than I can bear. . . . Anyone who finds me will kill me," he cried to God (Genesis 4:14). I have nothing to protect me from the worst possible act, he wailed.

Sometimes we feel hopeless, too. When the consequences of our actions bring destruction to our lives, we are consumed with fear and think of how lost our future seems to be. It's not remorse; it is simply our belief that

we are defenseless and powerless against whomever takes their revenge on us.

The greatest good news of Cain's horrible story is that God didn't say, "Serves you right. You made your bed; now lie in it." No, God's response to Cain's hopeless words was that his worst fears would not happen. I'm in charge here, God essentially said to Cain, and that's not going to happen. The punishment of banishment was enough.

Cain's defenseless life would be protected by God's mark on him. "The LORD put a sign on Cain so that no one who found him would assault him" (verse 15). Scripture does not tell us what the sign was or how those who encountered Cain would know what it meant. But we know that Cain settled somewhere east of Eden, "in the land of Nod" (verse 16).

*Nod* means "wandering" and is also related to the Hebrew term that is translated as "nomad" in verse 12. Although Cain was no doubt sad and lonely, he was safe from violent acts. The grace of God that cares for us when we have sinned is amazing. God is just, but in administering justice, God still loves and cares for us.

*What does it tell you about God that, when we have done something horrible, God still offers grace? How well do we extend grace to others, the way God does, when they have offended us?*

**God of grace, put your sign on me this day, and protect me by your great love. Show me ways to extend your love and grace to others; in Jesus' name. Amen.**