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Week Seven

The Arsenal of Grace

Chapter 10



Walter Wink tells of two peacemakers who visited a group of Polish Christians ten years after the end of World War II. “Would you be willing to meet with other Christians from West Germany?” the peacemakers asked. “They want to ask forgiveness for what Germany did to Poland during the war and to begin to build a new relationship.”

At first there was silence. Then one Pole spoke up. “What you are asking is impossible. Each stone of Warsaw is soaked in Polish blood! We cannot forgive!”

Before the group parted, however, they said the Lord’s Prayer together. When they reached the words “forgive us our sins as we forgive . . .,” everyone stopped praying. Tension swelled in the room. The Pole who had spoken so vehemently said, “I must say yes to you. I could no more pray the Our Father, I could no longer call myself a Christian, if I refuse to forgive. Humanly speaking, I cannot do it, but God will give us his strength!” Eighteen months later the Polish and West German Christians met together in Vienna, establishing friendships that continue to this day.



Paul Tillich once defined forgiveness as remembering the past in order that it might be forgotten—a principle that applies to nations as well as individuals. Though forgiveness is never easy,

and may take generations, what else can break the chains that enslave people to their historical past?

I will never forget a scene that I witnessed in the Soviet Union in October 1991. At the time, the Soviet empire was unraveling, Mikhail Gorbachev was hanging on to office by a string, and Boris Yeltsin was consolidating power by the day. I accompanied a delegation of Christians who met with Russia's leaders in response to their plea for help in "restoring morality" to their country.

Although Gorbachev and all the government officials we visited had received us warmly, old-timers in our group warned us to expect different treatment the evening we visited KGB headquarters.

"Meeting with you here tonight," General Nikolai Stolyarov, Vice-Chairman of the KGB, began, "is a plot twist that could not have been conceived by the wildest fiction writer." Then he startled us by saying, "We here in the USSR realize that too often we've been negligent in accepting those of the Christian faith. But political questions cannot be decided until there is sincere repentance, a return to faith by the people. That is the cross I must bear. In the study of scientific atheism, there was the idea that religion divides people. Now we see the opposite: love for God can only unite."

Our heads spun. Where did he learn the phrase "bear a cross"? And the other word—*repentance*?

Stolyarov explained in measured tones: "I have spoken of repentance. This is an essential step. There can be no *perestroika* apart from repentance. The time has come to repent of that past. We have broken the Ten Commandments, and for this we pay today."

Abruptly, the meeting took a more personal turn as Alex Leonovich, the translator, rose to speak. A native of Byelorussia, he had escaped during Stalin's reign of terror and had emigrated to the United States. For forty-six years he had been broadcasting Christian programs, often jammed, back to the land of his birth. He knew personally many Christians who had been tortured and persecuted for their faith. For him, to be translating such a message of reconciliation from a high official of the KGB was bewildering and nearly incomprehensible.

Alex spoke slowly and softly to General Stolyarov. “General, many members of my family suffered because of this organization,” Alex said. “I myself had to leave the land that I loved. My uncle, who was very dear to me, went to a labor camp in Siberia and never returned. General, you say that you repent. Christ taught us how to respond. On behalf of my family, on behalf of my uncle who died in the Gulag, I forgive you.”

And then Alex Leonovich, Christian evangelist, reached over to General Nikolai Stolyarov, the Vice-Chairman of the KGB, and gave him a Russian bear hug. While they embraced, Stolyarov whispered something to Alex, and not until later did we learn what he said. “Only two times in my life have I cried. Once was when my mother died. The other is tonight.”



For the next decades—and perhaps centuries—the former Soviet Union will be confronting issues of forgiveness. With good reason, Russians do not trust each other or their government. The past must be remembered before it can be overcome.

Even so, overcoming history is possible, however slowly and imperfectly. The chains of ungrace can indeed snap. We in the United States have had experience with reconciliation on a national scale: archenemies in World War II, Germany and Japan are now two of our staunchest allies. Even more significantly, we fought a bloody Civil War that set family against family and the nation against itself.

After the Civil War, rather than punishing the South, Abraham Lincoln said, “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?” setting forth instead a magnanimous plan of Reconstruction. Even more impressive are the steps toward reconciliation between white and black races, one of which used to *own* the other. The lingering effects of racism prove that it takes many years and much hard work to undo injustice. Still, every step African-Americans take toward participation as citizens implies a move toward forgiveness.

I grew up a racist. Although I am not yet fifty years old, I remember well when the South practiced a perfectly legal form of apartheid. Stores in downtown Atlanta had three rest rooms: White Men, White Women, and Colored. Motels and restaurants served white patrons only, and when the Civil Rights Act made such discrimination illegal, many owners shuttered their establishments.

When Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, our church founded a private school as a haven for whites, expressly barring all black students. We used to call Martin Luther King Jr. “Martin Lucifer Coon.” We said that King was a card-carrying Communist, a Marxist agent who merely posed as a minister. Not until much later was I able to appreciate the moral strength of the man who, perhaps more than any other person, kept the South from outright racial war.

King deliberately stage-managed scenes of confrontation, accepting beatings, jailings, and other brutalities, because he believed a complacent nation would rally around his cause only when they saw the evil of racism manifest in its ugliest extreme. By forcing evil out into the open, King was attempting to tap into a national reservoir of moral outrage, a concept my friends and I were not equipped to understand.

King had developed a sophisticated strategy of war fought with grace, not gunpowder. He never refused to meet with his adversaries. He opposed policies but not personalities. Most importantly, he countered violence with nonviolence, and hatred with love. “Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred,” he exhorted his followers.

Their real goal, King said, was not to defeat the white man but “to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority. . . . The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community.” And that is what Martin Luther King Jr. finally set into motion, even in die-hard racists like me. The power of grace disarmed my own stubborn evil.



Elton Trueblood notes that the image Jesus used to describe the church's destiny—"the gates of hell will not prevail against it"—is a metaphor of offense, not defense. Christians are storming the gates, and they will prevail. No matter how it looks at any given point in history, the gates guarding the powers of evil will not withstand an assault by grace.

The Cold War, says former Senator Sam Nunn, ended "not in a nuclear inferno, but in a blaze of candles in the churches of Eastern Europe." Several hundred thousand people took part in candlelight processions in East Germany, singing hymns and praying. Police and soldiers with all their weapons seemed powerless against such a force. Ultimately, on the night a similar march in East Berlin attracted one million protesters, the hated Berlin Wall came tumbling down without a shot being fired. A huge banner appeared across a Leipzig street: *Wir danken Dir, Kirche* (We thank you, church).

Like a gale of pure air driving out stagnant clouds of pollution, peaceful revolution spread across the globe. In 1989 alone ten nations comprising half a billion people experienced nonviolent revolutions. In many of these, the Christian minority played a crucial role.

Then in 1994 came the most surprising revolution of all, surprising because nearly everyone expected bloodshed. In South Africa, after a mediation team led by Henry Kissinger had abandoned all hope of convincing the Inkatha Freedom Party to participate in elections, a Christian diplomat from Kenya met privately with all the principals, prayed with them, and helped change their minds.

Nelson Mandela broke the chain of ungrace when he emerged from twenty-six years of imprisonment with a message of forgiveness and reconciliation, not revenge. F. W. De Klerk himself felt what he later described as "a strong sense of calling." He told his congregation that God was calling him to save all the people of South Africa, even though he knew that would mean rejection by his own people.


Black leaders insisted that De Klerk apologize for racial apartheid. He balked, because the people who had started the policy included his own father. But Bishop Desmond Tutu believed it essential that the process of reconciliation in South Africa begin with forgiveness, and he would not relent. According to Tutu, “One lesson we should be able to teach the world, and that we should be able to teach the people of Bosnia, Rwanda, and Burundi, is that we are ready to forgive.” Eventually, De Klerk did apologize.

Because it goes against human nature, forgiveness must be taught and practiced, as one would practice any difficult craft. “Forgiveness is not just an occasional act: it is a permanent attitude,” said Martin Luther King Jr. What greater gift could Christians give to the world than the forming of a culture that upholds grace and forgiveness?

The Music of Grace in God’s Word

Read together the following passage from the Bible.

Matthew 16:13–20



The Harmony of Grace Around Me and Within (25 Minutes)

If you are in a larger group, break into groups of four to six for this discussion time. Introduce yourselves to one another if necessary. Tell the group about a time you locked yourself out of your car or house. Where were your keys? Who rescued you?

1. Look at the story of the Polish Christians who prayed the Lord’s Prayer, printed at the beginning of this session. “I could no longer call myself a Christian, if I refuse to

forgive,” the Pole said. “Humanly speaking, I cannot do it, but God will give us his strength!” At the moment the Pole spoke, did he *want* to forgive? Were his words spoken more from his mind or his heart?

When we act in integrity to the gospel, should we wait for healing to occur first within ourselves before acting, or should we act and expect the healing to follow?

2. Look at the statement drafted by the East German parliament after the first free elections:

We, the first freely elected parliamentarians of the GDR . . . on behalf of the citizens of this land, admit responsibility for the humiliation, expulsion and murder of Jewish men, women and children. We feel sorrow and shame, and acknowledge this burden of German history. . . . Immeasurable suffering was inflicted on the peoples of the world during the era of national socialism. . . . We ask all the Jews of the world to forgive us. We ask the people of Israel to forgive us for the hypocrisy and hostility of official East German policies toward Israel and for the persecution and humiliation of Jewish citizens in our country after 1945 as well.

What do you think about this parliament accepting responsibility for actions that most of its members did not personally commit? Were they inappropriately seek-

ing forgiveness that wasn't theirs to seek? Would a statement similar to the one above, offered by the U.S. government asking forgiveness of African-Americans for the years of slavery, be a positive step toward reconciliation between races?

If forgiveness involves remembering the past in order that it might be forgotten, of what value are Holocaust museums, the Vietnam memorial, documentaries on the Civil War, and the remains of a crumbled Berlin Wall? Have any of these or similar remembrances helped to bring the past to life for you and in turn bring about personal repentance or forgiveness?

I talk about my own experience with racism. Have you had a similar experience—perhaps you served in Vietnam or worked for a bad employer or had a difficult church experience—that forced you to struggle with issues of forgiveness and reconciliation?

3. Review the story of the KGB in the Soviet Union, printed at the beginning of this session. The story is found in more detail on pages 126–29 in the book. How could men who had been so evil for so long truly change? How could men who had been unchristian for so long suddenly understand

the core of the gospel? Would you have responded skeptically, like the Russian photographer? See Matthew 16:18.

Does this true story give you hope for a situation or relationship in your life that seems irreconcilable? If you'd like, tell the group about the situation.

4. Growing up, what were your parents' views on racism? What were your views? Have your views changed over time? Do you currently have close friends from other races?

“The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community,” said Martin Luther King Jr. You may live in a community without much racial diversity, and you may have never held racist attitudes. Even if that is the case, do you think it's important for you to do what you can to better understand the pain of those who have suffered racially? How could you do this?

5. Review the examples of how peaceful revolution helped change South Africa, printed at the beginning of this session. These are found in more detail on pages 135–37 in the book. As with the Soviet Union, it once seemed hopeless to expect change in South Africa. But healing change came, largely due to peaceful revolution, forgiveness, and the continuing work of reconciliation.

What cause or issue of injustice weighs most heavily in your life? Maybe racism? Abortion? Gender discrimination? Religious discrimination? Issues of poverty and wealth? Something else? What would a peaceful revolution on your part look like? Are you now engaging in a peaceful battle, with the goal of forgiveness and reconciliation? If not, how could you begin?

Do you have any prayer requests to share with the group?

God's Song of Grace to Me (10–15 Minutes)

[Leader: During this part of the session, we will first listen to music. Afterward, instead of spending time together in silence, we will take part in a Benedictine-style service of forgiveness and reconciliation. Prepare for this ahead of time by gathering a punch bowl or serving bowl for each small group of four to six people. Groups of five or six may need two bowls, depending on the size of the bowls. Fill the bowls with water. If there are issues of reconciliation that need to be resolved in your church, study group,

or community, consider inviting the appropriate parties to this session to take part in this service.]

Listen to a musical version of the Lord's Prayer together (see "Grace Notes," following). Close your eyes and ask God to prepare your heart as you listen. Then, staying in small groups of four to six, join in a Benedictine-style service of forgiveness and reconciliation. The leader or a designated person in each group will read Matthew 6:14–15, Luke 6:37–38, and Ephesians 4:31–5:2. Then take turns in the small group, identifying issues in which you need to forgive. If some people have private issues, spend a few moments in silence so they can speak of these to God. Then all of you will submerge your hands in the bowl of water. Each person's hands should be clasped together, as if holding the grievance. The leader or a designated person will pray for God's grace to forgive. Then pray together the Lord's Prayer. As you pray, open your hands in a symbolic gesture of releasing the grievance, choosing to forgive. This service can be a powerful and transforming physical act of forgiveness.

Grace Notes

Listen together to Tchaikovsky's *Pater Noster* ("The Lord's Prayer"). Many libraries will have a CD containing this piece and available for public use. If you do not have access to Tchaikovsky's version, find another recording of the Lord's Prayer, or find a version your group can sing together with the piano, guitar, or *a capella*.

Joining in the Song of Grace

- This week continue to pray about personal issues of forgiveness. If it would be helpful, make a practice each day

this week of filling up your bathroom sink with water and praying with your cupped hands submerged in the water. Renew your commitment to forgiveness each day as you pray, releasing your hands and a grievance that again may have threatened to take hold in you.

- This week as you read the newspaper or listen to the radio or watch television, pay attention to news of countries that have experienced peaceful revolution—for instance, countries in the former Soviet Union, and countries in Eastern Europe. Pray for God's help as individuals and these governments continue in the process of reconciliation. Pay attention also to news of countries who are still plagued with conflict. Pray for a peaceful release of hostilities.
- Consider reading the book *Breaking Down Walls: A Model for Reconciliation in an Age of Racial Strife* by Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein. The book is available through Promise Keepers by calling 1-800-456-7594. Or read *More Than Equals* by John Perkins and Chris Rice (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

Background Music of Grace This Week (Optional)

Use the following Bible passages in your quiet moments this week as you reflect on God's grace. Use these readings as your time allows.

Day 1: 2 Corinthians 4:7–18

Day 2: Ephesians 1:15–23

Day 3: Ephesians 3:14–21

Day 4: 1 Peter 1:1–25

Day 5: 2 Peter 1:1–11



Week Eight

Oddballs, Jesus, and Me

Chapters 11–13



In the 1960s a Yale Divinity School graduate and Southerner named Will Campbell befriended a Harvard Divinity School student named Jonathan Daniels. Campbell and Daniels were each involved in the civil rights crusade. Campbell's theology was undergoing some testing in those days. Much of the opposition to his work came from "good Christians." Campbell found allies more easily among agnostics, socialists, and a few devout Northerners.

"In ten words or less, what's the Christian message?" one agnostic had challenged him. The interlocutor was P. D. East, a renegade newspaper editor who viewed Christians as the enemy.

I said, "We're all bastards but God loves us anyway." . . .
He often reminded me of what I had said that day.

The definition stung P. D. East who, unbeknown to Campbell, was indeed illegitimate and had been called "bastard" all his life. (Campbell had meant "bastard" in a theological sense: we are illegitimate children "adopted" by God.) He put that definition to a ruthless test on the darkest day of Campbell's life, a day when an Alabama deputy sheriff named Thomas Coleman gunned down Campbell's twenty-six-year-old friend Jonathan Daniels.

That night, Campbell spoke with P. D. East and got "the most enlightening theological lesson I ever had in my life." P. D. pressed Campbell on whether his definition of faith could stand the test.

“Was Jonathan a bastard?” P. D. asked first. Campbell replied that though he was one of the most gentle guys he’d ever known, it’s true that everyone is a sinner. In those terms, yes, he was a “bastard.”

“All right. Is Thomas Coleman a bastard?” That question, Campbell found much easier to answer. You bet the murderer was a bastard.

Then P. D. pulled his chair close, placed his bony hand on Campbell’s knee, and looked directly into his eyes. “Which one of these two bastards do you think God loves the most?” The question hit home, like an arrow to the heart.

Suddenly everything became clear. Everything. It was a revelation. . . . I began to whimper. But the crying was interspersed with laughter. . . . I was laughing at myself, at twenty years of a ministry which had become, without my realizing it, a ministry of liberal sophistication. . . .

I agreed that the notion that a man could go to a store, . . . fire a shotgun blast at one of them, tearing his lungs and heart and bowels from his body, . . . and that God would set him free is almost more than I could stand. But unless that is precisely the case then there is no Gospel, there is no Good News. Unless that is the truth we have only bad news, we are back with law alone.

What Will Campbell learned that night was a new insight into grace. The free offer of grace extends not just to the undeserving but to those who in fact deserve the *opposite*.

This message lodged so deep inside Will Campbell that he resigned his position with the National Council of Churches and became what he wryly calls “an apostle to the rednecks.” He bought a farm in Tennessee, and today is as likely to spend his time among Klansmen and racists as among racial minorities and white liberals. A lot of people, he decided, were volunteering to help minorities; he knew of no one ministering to the Thomas Colemans of the world.



I once explored the following question with a congregation on a Sunday morning: “What did God have against lobster?” We looked at the laws detailed in Leviticus concerning clean and unclean foods. Then we looked at the story of Peter in Acts 10, where God gave a vision of a sheet filled with unclean animals and removed all prohibitions. Peter was shaken to the core. Yet why had God declared lobster and rabbits and camels, for instance, unclean in the first place?

After studying the various theories on Old Testament ritual laws, I have come up with an all-encompassing principle that, I believe, expresses the essence of the laws on uncleanness: No Oddballs Allowed. The Israelites’ diet scrupulously excluded any abnormal or “oddball” animals, and the same principle applied also to “clean” animals used in worship. God wanted the unblemished of the flock. God demanded perfection; God deserved the best. No Oddballs Allowed.

The Old Testament applies a similar, far more troubling, ranking to people. It is one thing to label animals unclean and quite another to label people unclean, but Old Testament laws did not shrink from that step. In sum, those with damaged bodies or damaged family lines (bastards) failed to qualify: No Oddballs Allowed. Menstruating women, men who had recently had a nocturnal emission, women who had undergone childbirth, people with skin diseases or running sores, anyone who had touched a corpse—all these were declared ceremonially unclean.

When rumors spread that Jesus could be the long-awaited Messiah, pious Jews were more scandalized than galvanized. Had he not touched unclean persons, such as those suffering from leprosy? Had he not let a woman of ill repute wash his feet with her hair? He dined with tax collectors—one even joined his inner circle of the Twelve—and was notoriously lax about the rules of ritual cleanness and Sabbath observance.

Moreover, Jesus deliberately crossed into Gentile territory. He praised a Roman centurion as having more faith than anyone in

Israel. He healed a half-breed Samaritan with leprosy and had a lengthy conversation with a Samaritan woman. This woman became the first “missionary” appointed by Jesus and the first person to whom he openly revealed his identity as Messiah. Then Jesus culminated his time on earth by giving his disciples the “Great Commission,” a command to take the gospel to unclean Gentiles.

Jesus’ approach to “unclean” people dismayed his countrymen and, in the end, helped to get him crucified. In essence, Jesus canceled the cherished principle of the Old Testament, No Oddballs Allowed, replacing it with a new rule of grace: “We’re all oddballs, but God loves us anyhow.”

We ourselves can be agents of God’s holiness, for God now dwells within us. In the midst of an unclean world we can stride, as Jesus did, seeking ways to be a source of holiness. The sick and the maimed are for us not hot spots of contamination but potential reservoirs of God’s mercy. We are called upon to extend that mercy, to be conveyers of grace, not avoiders of contagion.

The shift that Jesus introduced has important consequences for every Christian. Jesus’ revolution of grace affects me deeply in at least two ways.

First, it affects my access to God. Whereas Old Testament worshipers purified themselves before entering the temple and presented their offerings to God through a priest, in the Book of Acts God’s followers were meeting in private homes and addressing God with the informal *Abba*. It was a familiar term of family affection, like “Daddy,” and before Jesus no one would have thought of applying such a word to Yahweh, the Sovereign Lord of the Universe. After him, it became the standard word used by early Christians to address God in prayer.

The second way in which Jesus’ revolution affects me centers on how we are to view “different” people. Jesus’ example convicts me today, because I sense a subtle shift in the reverse direction. As society unravels and immorality increases, I hear calls from some Christians that we show less mercy and more morality, calls that hark back to the style of the Old Testament. Some Christians

I know have taken on the task of “moral exterminator” for the evil-infested society around them.

I share a deep concern for our society. I am struck, though, by the alternative power of mercy as demonstrated by Jesus, who came for the sick and not the well, for the sinners and not the righteous. Jesus never countenanced evil, but he did stand ready to forgive it. Somehow, he gained the reputation as a lover of sinners, a reputation that his followers are in danger of losing today. As Dorothy Day put it, “I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”



My book gives a detailed account of my friendship with Mel White. I won't reproduce it here, and I must admit I thought long and hard about including the story in my book. In the end, though, I felt it expressed much of what I have learned personally about grace. I hope that in your group, you use this as a case study in grace, responding to it honestly but without letting the conversation drift into a debate on the particular issue of homosexuality. That was not my point at all.

I learned an important insight into “different” people from Mel White's parents. They were interviewed on network television, along with Mel, his wife, and his friends. At one point, the TV interviewer asked Mel's parents on-camera, “You know what other Christians are saying about your son. They say he's an abomination. What do you think about that?”

“Well,” the mother answered in a sweet, quavery voice, “he may be an abomination, but he's still our pride and joy.”

That line has stayed with me because I came to see it as a heartrending definition of grace. I came to see that Mel White's mother expressed how God views every one of us. In some ways we are all abominations to God—*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*—and yet somehow, against all reason, God loves us anyhow. Grace declares that we are still God's pride and joy.

My friendship with Mel has taught me much about grace. On the surface the word may seem a shorthand expression for the

fuzzy tolerance of liberalism: can't we all just get along? Grace is different, though. Traced back to its theological roots, it includes an element of self-sacrifice, a cost.

My study of Jesus' life convinces me that whatever barriers we must overcome in treating "different" people cannot compare to what a holy God—who dwelled in the Most Holy Place, and whose presence caused fire and smoke to belch from mountain-tops, bringing death to any unclean person who wandered near—overcame when he descended to join us on planet Earth.

We may be abominations, but we are still God's pride and joy. All of us in the church need "grace-healed eyes" to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us. "To love a person," said Dostoevsky, "means to see him as God intended him to be."

The Music of Grace in God's Word

Read together the following passages from the Bible.

Romanø 3:21–24

Coloøðianø 4:5–6

1 Peter 4:7–11



The Harmony of Grace Around Me and Within (25 Minutes)

If you are in a larger group, break into groups of four to six for this discussion time. Introduce yourselves to each other if necessary. Tell the group about yourself growing up. What made you feel like an oddball?

[Leader: We are covering a lot of material in this session. Consider ahead of time which questions you want to cover. If your schedule allows, you may want to consider spending two weeks on this session.]

1. What do you think of Will Campbell's summary of the Christian message: "We're all bastards but God loves us anyway"? Are you offended by the language? Have you ever felt anything like this—unworthy, illegitimate? How well does this statement paraphrase Romans 3:21–24?

In Will Campbell's experience, Thomas Coleman was one of the most obvious "bastards" around. When Campbell reckoned with the idea of God's love—and forgiveness—even for a murderer, he had uncovered the heart of the gospel. For some people, grappling with God's love for fundamentalist Christians is most difficult. For others, it is the thought of God's love for "politically correct" liberals, or wealthy conservatives, or feminists in the church. What types of people are the most challenging for you as you consider extending grace? Be sensitive to one another if you choose to discuss aloud.

What would you think of the idea of committing yourself to ministering to these kinds of people, as Campbell did to the Klansmen and racists?

2. Have you heard any teaching or opinions about why God restricted the eating of certain foods in Old Testament times? Briefly state what you have heard. Do you know any Jews who practice strict kosher?

Rabbi Jacob Neusner says, “If I had to say in a few words what makes something unclean, it is something that, for one reason or another, is abnormal.” Men, women, and animals with a variety of abnormalities were declared ceremonially unclean, and their access to God was restricted. Does it trouble you to read of these Old Testament laws? How would you feel, living in this kind of society today? Imagine living as an “outcast” in this kind of society for many years. Then a religious person who seems to be from God comes and talks to you, touches you, eats at your table, even though you are considered unclean. How would you feel?

Review the stories of Jesus’ compassion toward unclean people. Many are discussed on pages 152–54 in the book, or look them up in the Bible: the stories of men with leprosy, an adulterous woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her hair, tax collectors who hosted Jesus for dinner, a Roman centurion with great faith, a Samaritan (half-breed) woman at a well, a prodigal son, a Samaritan who saved a robbery victim, a naked madman, a woman with a bleeding prob-

lem. Jesus set a new standard for godliness: We are called upon to extend God's mercy—to be conveyers of grace through the Spirit within us, not avoiders of contagion. Does this idea make you feel free to love? Is there a risk of losing sight of God's stand against sin?

3. Briefly consider how your biological father related to you when you were a child. Tell the group if you'd like.

Even if your father was not ideal, imagine that he was abundantly loving, quick to pull you onto his lap and hug you, always verbal in expressions of praise and adoration, never too busy for you and always ready to listen. Now think of God this way. Would speaking to God as “Daddy” seem natural? Would crying out to him feel safe?

What do Colossians 4:5–6 and 1 Peter 4:7–11 have to say about dispensing grace? Who do they tell us to be gracious toward? How do these commands reflect God's character?

Is there a place for Christians to take on the role of “moral exterminator”? Have you ever taken a strong moral stand regarding a particular issue? What was your motivation? How did you go about expressing your moral objection? How can a Christian take such a stand and express grace at the same time?

4. I told the story of my friendship with Mel White, a homosexual. How did you react to this story?

5. How do you feel about the response of the Christian protesters toward homosexuals that I describe in telling of the gay march on Washington, D.C. (pages 164–67 in the book)?

Are there any known homosexuals who worship in your church? If not, what do you think would happen if someone did come?

I mention the relative ease with which many churches love those divorced and those living together outside of

marriage, while vehemently rejecting those who profess homosexuality. (Consider Matthew 5:21–22, 27–28, 31–32.) Do you think this is a fair comparison? Why or why not?

6. Does grace in the face of homosexuality, or any other moral issue, seem to you more like an excuse for tolerating liberalism? I learned in my friendship with Mel that offering grace isn't simply the easy way out. It involves a cost to me, a sacrifice, as well as a cost to Mel for his grace toward me. As you see it, what are the "risks" of grace?

See the quote by Helmut Thielicke on page 175 in the book. "Jesus did not *identify* the person with his sin, but rather saw in this sin something alien, something that really did not belong to him, something that merely chained and mastered him and from which he would free him and bring him back to his real self. Jesus was able to love men because he loved them right through the layer of mud." How close is your view of sinners to Jesus' view?

Do you have any prayer requests to share with the group?

God's Song of Grace to Me (10–15 Minutes)

Listen to some music that celebrates love and grace, and then spend some time in silence with God. Pray as Jesus did, to your ever-loving parent—*Daddy, Abba*. Express your questions, ask for forgiveness, tell of your frustration, or simply groan in the presence of God, who knows and understands you. If you'd like, write your prayer in the space provided or in your journal.

Grace Note

Listen together to a song by Kathy Troccoli, "Love One Another." It is found on her CD or cassette titled *Love and Mercy* (Reunion, 1997). The song is dedicated to Pastor Ray Highfield's His Touch Ministries, a Houston-based organization offering spiritual support to people with AIDS. More than forty Christian artists sing along with Kathy, including Sandi Patty, Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, Babbie Mason, 4 Him, and Billy and Sarah Gaines. They speak of tearing down walls by God's grace. If you do not have access to Kathy Troccoli, sing together the praise song that goes

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me

Or find a hymnal and sing together "Jesus, Lover of My Soul."

Joining in the Song of Grace

- Pray this week about the fears you may have that are related to showing grace to people whom you have not been gracious toward in the past. Think about why you are afraid. Ask God to take your fears, put grace in their place, and begin a miraculous work.
- Consider contacting any of the following organizations, which minister to homosexuals and their families. Find out more about their ministry and how you or your church could extend the ministry to your community.

Exodus International. A Christian referral and resource network whose purpose is to proclaim that freedom from homosexuality is possible. P.O. Box 2121, San Rafael, CA 94912; phone 415-454-1017.

Desert Stream Ministries. Seeks to equip the body of Christ to effectively minister healing to the sexually and relationally broken, through the healing of individuals and the raising up of ministries in the context of the local church, based upon the biblical foundation of compassion, integrity, and dependence on God. P.O. Box 17635, Anaheim Hills, CA 92817-7635; phone 714-779-6899.

NARTH (National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality). Seeks to make effective psychological therapy available to all homosexual men and women who seek change, as well as to open for public discussion all issues relating to homosexuality. 16542 Ventura Blvd., Suite 416, Encino, CA 91436; phone 818-789-4440.

Spatula Ministries. A ministry started by Christian author Barbara Johnson, committed to providing restoration to the family, especially those seeking to love a homosexual family member. A newsletter of support is available. P.O. Box 444, LaHabra, CA 90633-0444; phone 562-691-7369.

Background Music of Grace This Week
(Optional)

Day 1: Matthew 8:1–13

Day 2: Matthew 9:27–34

Day 3: Mark 5:21–34

Day 4: John 4:1–42

Day 5: Matthew 15:1–20



Week Nine

Loopholes

Chapter 14



To this point, I freely admit, I have presented a one-sided picture of grace. I have portrayed God as a lovesick father eager to forgive, and grace as a force potent enough to break the chains that bind us, and merciful enough to overcome deep differences between us. Depicting grace in such sweeping terms makes people nervous, and I concede that I have skated to the very edge of danger. I have done so because I believe the New Testament does too.

The potential for “grace abuse” was brought home to me forcefully in a conversation with a friend I’ll call Daniel. One night I sat in a restaurant and listened as Daniel confided to me that he had decided to leave his wife after fifteen years of marriage. He had found someone younger and prettier, someone who “makes me feel alive, like I haven’t felt in years.” He and his wife had no strong incompatibilities. He simply wanted a change.

A Christian, Daniel knew well the personal and moral consequences of what he was about to do. His decision to leave would inflict permanent damage on his wife and three children. Even so, he said, the force pulling him toward the younger woman, like a powerful magnet, was too strong to resist.

I listened to Daniel’s story with sadness and grief. Then, during the dessert course, he dropped the bombshell: “Actually, Philip, the reason I wanted to see you tonight was to ask you a question that’s been bothering me. Do you think God can forgive something as awful as I am about to do?”