

The Grace that Comes Before

John 6:35, 41-51

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A somewhat advanced society had discovered how to package basic knowledge into pill form. People could select the kind of knowledge that they wanted, take a pill, and—voilà!!—they were instant experts.

A young man was getting ready for college, and he realized that he was going to have to step it up a bit in terms of his knowledge if he was going to succeed in school. So he went to the local pharmacist and inquired about the availability of certain knowledge pills. He showed the pharmacist his course list—including Calculus, English, Biology and American History—and he asked the pharmacist for enough knowledge pills to get him through the semester. So the pharmacist hands the young man four small pill jars, each with a four-month supply of knowledge pills.

Then the student had one more request. He said, “I have heard that one should be suspicious about some of the things we hear on college campuses, that the faculty can sometimes manipulate facts to fit their particular viewpoint. Do you have any pill that can help me discern the truth?”

The pharmacist said, “As a matter of fact, I do have a truth pill. I have to go back and get it out of our storeroom. Wait here while I go get it.”

After a few minutes the pharmacist returned with a bag and handed it to the student. The student was surprised by the weight of the package, but he assumed it must be a semester's supply like the others. But when he opened the bag, there was only one pill, about the size of a grapefruit. “My goodness,” he exclaimed, “how come the truth pill is so enormous?”

The pharmacist simply shrugged his shoulders and said, “Well, you know, the truth is usually hard to swallow.”

As we continue our five-week journey through the sixth chapter of the gospel of John, in which Jesus reveals himself as the Bread of Life and teaches us the implications of that revelation, we come this morning to the first instance of people resisting this teaching. Evidently, they are unable to accept the notion that this man Jesus, whose family of origin is suspect in the first place, has been sent by God. The truth about Jesus, it seems, can be hard to swallow.

Curiously enough, Jesus doesn't chastise the people who reject him. Instead, Jesus says that not everyone can believe in him. In fact, he says that, unless we receive divine help to understand the truth about Jesus, nobody can believe in him. “No one can come to me,” says Jesus, “ unless drawn by the Father who sent me.”¹

And with that statement, Jesus has given us yet another truth that is hard to swallow: No one can come to Jesus, unless we are first drawn to Jesus by the Father. Let's parse that just a little bit more to make it even more clear: Instead of saying “No one *can* come to Jesus...”, let's say it this way: “No one *is able* to come to Jesus, unless we are first drawn to Jesus by the Father.” In other words, none of us in ourselves has the capacity to come to Jesus, unless we are first drawn to Jesus by the Father. So much for the doctrine of free will, right? How's that for a hard-to-swallow truth?

It is a debate that has pestered the Christian church from the very earliest days, and it underscores for us the tension that exists between the sovereignty of God and God's initiative in our salvation on the one hand, and our free will in choosing to believe in Christ on the other. In the fourth century church a leader named Pelagius held that humans have the capacity to choose God in and of ourselves. That is, salvation comes to us through our

¹John 6:44

faith in Christ, and we are able to choose to believe in Christ without help from any outside agency, including God. In Pelagius' theology, God helps those who help themselves.

At the same time, Augustine argued that when humans became corrupted by sin at the fall in the Garden of Eden, then we lost the ability to choose the good. We are enslaved to sin, and on our own we are incapable of initiating our salvation. Salvation can only come to us if God first turns our hearts in his direction. In Augustine's theology, God helps those who can't help themselves.

The Christian church rejected the position of Pelagius, and affirmed the Augustinian position. John Calvin, the St. John of the Presbyterian tradition, also adopted the position of Augustine, as did the influential 18th century American Calvinist Jonathan Edwards. Edwards' position was this: We do have freedom, in that we freely follow the path of our desires and do whatever we want without outside interference, compulsion, or restraint. However, we do not have the ability to choose what our desires or wants will be.

It can be explained like this: Say five of us were to go into an art gallery, and of the five, three of us are immediately struck by the beauty of one of the paintings on the far wall, and we go over to the painting. The other two don't find anything remarkable about the painting. Did the three of us choose to be impressed by the painting on the far wall? Did we make ourselves desire that painting? No. We simply walked into the gallery and found ourselves attracted to the painting. And because we were attracted to the painting we went over to look at it more closely.²

You see, we do not have the ability to *determine* what it is we desire or want; we do, however, have complete freedom to *pursue* whatever it is we desire or want. The problem is, without the help of God, we are unable to desire or want what God offers to us in Jesus Christ. And so God must plant within our hearts that desire; once the desire is there, we have the freedom to decide what we will do in regard to the desire. God doesn't force us or compel us. But he must first draw us by planting the desire in our hearts.

And so it is that before we can accept the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, there must first be another grace that comes to us, a grace that puts in our hearts the desire to come to Jesus in the first place.

No one can come to me, says Jesus, unless first drawn by the Father who sent me. There must be a grace that comes before. We call it prevenient grace.

Prevenient grace is the grace of God that comes before our conversion. It is the grace that causes our conversion. Even before we are aware of it, God is at work in our lives, calling out to us as lost sheep, leading us, prodding us, wooing us back to him. It is grace that we cannot recognize in the moment, but in looking back on our lives, it becomes plain as day.

Prevenient grace—the grace that comes before—may be as simple as your parents or grandparents bringing you to church as a child. Prevenient grace—the grace that comes before—may be in the form of the seemingly random path your life has taken through the years, ultimately bringing you to a point at which you were able to receive the grace of God in Jesus Christ; prevenient grace is directly related to the providence of God whereby God cares for our world.

I can look back on my life and see God's prevenient grace in action. I am blessed that the Christian faith has always had a strong influence in my life. My parents have always been strong Christians. As long as I can remember, I have been part of churches that take the teachings of the Bible seriously; the prevenient grace of God was at work through my family and my church associations. But even the seemingly normal everyday events of my life take on new meaning when I look at them and appreciate the grace of God drawing me closer and closer to him. My choice of Davidson College, and my failing organic chemistry, thus changing the direction of my studies; and my later studies at the University of Texas followed by a return to my hometown and to my home church in San Antonio where I was embraced by new friends who shared God's love with me; even the death of a family friend—all of these seemingly random events were moments of grace that tilled the soil of my heart and drew me closer and closer to God, so that as an adult I was able to come to that moment when the faith that had

²For a good one-page summary of the positions of Pelagius, Augustine, and Jonathan Edwards, see Matt Matthews' article in [Lectionary Homiletics](#), August, 2009, p. 12.

surrounded me and influenced me all my life now became my own faith. Long before I could appreciate the grace of God in Jesus Christ, God was working in my life to create in my heart the desire that only Jesus could fulfill.

In the classic hymn of the Christian Church, *Amazing Grace*, there is a verse that goes like this: "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." The grace that taught my heart to fear, the grace that taught my heart to revere and hold God in complete awe—that is prevenient grace.

It is important to note that Jesus is not saying that God forces us to come to him. It is not by compulsion but by love that we are drawn to Jesus. God simply makes it possible for our wills to desire salvation; you and I still have the freedom to choose whether or not we will pursue that desire. John Calvin spoke of how God draws us toward Jesus: "This is not the kind of drawing that is violent, as if it were compelling [us] through external force. However, it is a powerful impulse of the Holy Spirit which enables [us] to be willing to follow Christ, [we] who had been unwilling and reluctant previously."³ It is by love, not by wrath or force, that God draws us unto his son.

The gospel proclaims that we are drawn to Jesus by the Father who sent him. We are drawn, not by wrath and condemnation, but by love. God is love. God draws us by love. That's what Jesus meant when he said, No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.

By ourselves we can't come to Jesus. But by the grace that comes before—by God's prevenient grace—we are drawn to Jesus.

The essence of the gospel is this: we can love God because he first loved us.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

³John Calvin, in *John*, The Crossway Classic Commentaries, edited by Alister McGrath and J.I. Packer, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), p. 164.