

# The extraordinary in the ordinary

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## AN EXTRAORDINARY TRANSFORMATION

I have a friend who once told me he doesn't have a problem knowing that God loves him. I thought that was really unfair. How come he could be so sure, when many, many times I am so unsure? One day he told me something of the story that had brought him to be able to be so sure: he told me a story of God's undeserving and unmerited grace and mercy. He told me a story that God loves no matter who, and no matter what. My best guess – many of us have a problem believing that God loves us. I keep saying "he loves us because he loves us because..." and you like the sound of that...but. If we have a problem believing that God loves me, we may have more of a problem with the idea that God loves everyone, because let's be honest, there are some people God should not love ... aren't there?

When Jesus sat down on the Mount and began to teach he challenged our thinking about who God loves. He looked at the people standing in front of him and he said .. God loves you... and you, and you, and you. God loves the physically repulsive, and those who smell bad; the twisted, misshapen, deformed; the too big, too little, too loud; the bald, the fat and the old; the drop outs and the burn outs; the broke and the broken; the drug addict and the divorced; the HIV positive and the herpes ridden; the brain damaged, the incurably ill; the barren and the pregnant too many times or at the wrong time; the over-employed, the unemployed and the unemployable; the swindled; the shoved aside; the lonely, the incompetent, the stupid; the emotionally starved and the emotionally dead; the brutal and the bigoted; the drug lords and the pornographers; war criminals and the sadists; the terrorist; the perverted, the filthy and the filthy rich; the murderer, the serial killer and the child abuser. And maybe we struggle that God loves these people.

In his book "What's so amazing about grace", Phillip Yancey has a chapter titled 'A home for bastards'. It's the story a man named Will Campbell. Will Campbell was a white, anti racist campaigner in 1960's America. He was, at this time, director of religious life at the University of Mississippi. Through his campaigning he met a young student called Jonathan Daniels with whom he became great friends. One day a newspaper editor called P.D. East challenged Will Campbell and all that he believed by asking him a simple question. This question, of course, was asked in the context of America's struggle with racism and apartheid. The question was: "In ten words or less, what's the Christian message?" Campbell's response was this: "We are all bastards but God loves us anyway."

Campbell's response stung P.D. East because, unknown to Campbell, he was indeed an illegitimate child and had been called 'bastard' all his life. P.D. East didn't respond to what Campbell had said except to say, "I gave you a ten word limit. If you want to try again you have two words left." Campbell didn't try again.

Ephesians 2 v 1-10 reads;

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

This is Paul reminding us of an extraordinary transformation that is possible only through the grace and mercy of God. This is God’s love in action. Paul reminds the Ephesians of what they once were: they were dead in their transgressions and sins. He means they were spiritually dead, they were once in a place where they had no relationship with God. There was a time when they lived in such a way that they had no possibility of living a full life – that is – life as God intended. And the truth is, that by nature we are spiritually dead. This goes all the way back to the garden, God’s dream was shattered as Adam and Eve chose to eat the fruit. And people have been living without reference to God ever since. By nature we follow the ways of the world and we get sucked into the evil of this age. We follow and engage in a society that is organised without reference to God, and we get swept along with the cultural bondage of the world. We drift along the stream of this world’s ideas of living. By nature, because we live without reference to God, we live under the power and influence of the devil – the ruler of the kingdom of the air. By Nature, we live under the influence of our fallen, self-centred nature that is the cravings of the flesh; pride, lust, envy, false ambition... By Nature, we will live lives without reference to God. We are, by nature objects of wrath (v3). Wrath is God’s personal, righteous constant hostility to evil; his refusal to compromise with it and his resolve to condemn it.

At this point it is hard to see God could love anyone let alone everyone! However, there are two very powerful words that bring about an extraordinary transformation...BUT GOD! (v4) The dream was shattered ... but God. Adam and Eve broke the relationship ... but God! We are by nature objects of wrath ... but God! We may be one of the outcasts: we may be fat, or bald, or misshapen, or too old or too loud; a burn out or a drop out; we may be broken, a drug addict, or divorced, or HIV positive or herpes ridden; we may be barren or pregnant at the wrong time, or lonely or abused, or incompetent or stupid, or emotionally dead; we may be brutal or hooked on pornography, or a criminal or filthy or filthy rich .. BUT... but God ....but God .... but God...!

A little time after he gave his definition of the Christian message, Campbell’s answer was put to the test. It happened on the darkest day of his life, his friend Jonathan Daniels had been shot dead by a white policeman, Thomas Coleman. P.D. East the journalist asked Campbell– was Jonathan a bastard? 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’. East

then asked: "Is Tomas Coleman a bastard?" Campbell found that much easier to answer – "you bet the murderer was a bastard!" Then P.D. East asked the question that hit home like an arrow to the heart: "Which of these two bastards do you think God loves the most?"

Will Campbell said this about what happened for him in that moment: "I agreed that the notion that a man could go to a store where a group of unarmed human beings are drinking soda pop and eating moon pies, fire a shogun blast at one of them, tearing his lungs and heart and bowels from his body, turn on another and send lead pellets ripping through his flesh and bones, 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."<sup>1</sup>

In that profound moment Will Campbell grasped those two words ... But God! But God, who is rich in mercy has saved us by his grace alone. None of us deserve it, but it is extended to all. There is no place that God's grace and mercy cannot reach you. It is open to all and God in his mercy and grace is keeping the dream alive. Only God's mercy reaches those who we think he should not love. Only God's grace rescues us from his judgement. His grace is a gracious, generous and extraordinary gift to all those he loves – everyone. We cannot earn it, neither do we deserve it and we cannot attain it by ourselves. But God loves us because he loves us because he loves .....His love meets us in his mercy and grace and it comes to us through Christ on a cross. When we respond to God's mercy and grace, an extraordinary transformation takes place, we are made alive with Christ – we have been rescued from death to life, we are seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. God is with us by the power of the Holy Spirit to help us as we continue to live for him. Knowing this and living in it and in his incomparably great power, we can now go on and live as God intended. For all this – some of us still struggle with believing that God loves us. The word saved in (v8) is used here in the past tense. It means that we have been saved from God's wrath or God's judgement. The way Paul uses it here he is thinking of the continuing impact in the Christian life of all that was achieved in Christ, on their behalf, when he died on the cross and was raised by God. That is all that we talked about in the first 15 verses of chapter 1.

These things are your true colours as God sees you. Now, some of us need to accept this for the first time others of us need to accept it again – believing again that we are loved by God. We're going to listen to a song; 'True colours'. It can remind us of what God really thinks of us in his great love that meets us in his grace and his mercy. And here's another door – the door of God's love – you are chosen, special, precious, accepted, alive. An extraordinary transformation – your true colours in Christ.

1. Quoted in Phillip Yancey's book 'What's so amazing about grace?' (Zondervan 1997) page 144

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church by Ian Phillips on Sunday

27/1/08

## TRUE COLOURS

I see your true colours shining through  
I see your true colours that's why I love you  
So don't be afraid to let them show  
Your true colours, true colours, are beautiful

You wear those sad eyes  
Don't be discouraged, Oh I realise it's hard to take courage  
In a world full of people, you can lose sight of it  
And the darkness inside you makes you feel so small  
I see your true colours shining through  
I see your true colours that's why I love you  
So don't be afraid to let them show  
Your true colours, true colours, are beautiful  
Oh, like a rainbow

Show me a smile, don't be unhappy  
Can't remember when I last saw you laughing  
When this world makes you crazy and you've taken all you can  
Just call me up, 'cause you know I'll be there

And see your true colours shining through  
I see your true colours that's why I love you  
So don't be afraid to let them show  
Your true colours, true colours are beautiful

Oh, like a rainbow

Such sad eyes, take courage now and realise

When this world makes you crazy

And you've taken all you can then

Just call me up 'cause you know I'll be there

And see your true colours shinning through

I see your true colours, that's why I love you

So don't be afraid to let them show

Your true colours, true colours,

True colours are shinning through

True colours, that's why I love you

So don't be afraid to let them show

Your true colours, true colours, true colours

Are beautiful, so beautiful like a rainbow

Show me your colours

Show me your rainbow

That's why I love you

True colours

Sung by Phil Collins