

## EXTRAVAGANT GRACE: ALL WILL BE SAVED

### LUKE 15

Imagine a basketball player throughout their entire college career making all of his or her free throws.-----Let me clarify that. Imagine a UNC basketball player making all of their free throws.

Or picture a baseball player getting a hit every time they are at the plate. Opps, I forgot about intentional walks. How could I forget about intentional walks with all of the Barry Bonds intentional walks this season. Well, let's imagine this: imagine a baseball player who gets on base every single time. OBP, on base percentage is 1000.

And envisage, if you will---and your Pastor is asking you to do it so let's be cooperative---- envisage a student making straight "A"s in school all the way from kindergarten to grad school. Let's even go so far as to say they make 100's on every single test.

Or consider this. Consider the possibility that Carowinds hates you, that Carowinds trembles when you walk through the gate because every game you play---whether it's the shoot the pistol with water at the target and make the horsie win the race or whether it's the toss the coins on the plates or the guess your age and weight and IQ---O.K. not your IQ, or the impossible game where you throw a ball through this small hole---whatever the game you always win and Carowinds hates to see you because you never lose, you always rack up.

And envisage this. I really like this one. Imagine a preacher preaching so well, a great preacher, a talented, gifted preacher preaching his or her heart every Sunday of every year, preaching so well the Christians jump over the pews, stand up and yell, turn somersaults, because the preacher is preaching so wonderfully, and the Christians need a dozen hankies to wipe the tears every Sunday and the congregants beg the preacher, plead with the preacher to keep preaching even after the sermon is finished.----- O.K., I'm stretching it. O.K., guilty as charged. I'm exaggerating. Yes, it's hyperbole, a grand overstatement.

And you may think today's scripture lessons are that also: exaggeration, hyperbole, overstatement. But I don't. I don't believe for a second Luke is stretching it when he gets us to imagine a God who makes sure every sheep is in the fold, a God who values every coin so much the loss of even one coin is not permitted, a father whose heart will not be content, will not be satisfied, a father who will not be happy until all his sons are home.

I'm not making this up. It's not exaggeration.

Please excuse me, please forgive me if I don't engage in homiletic hell fire and damnation. Please excuse me if I don't try to scare the hell out of you. Please excuse me if I don't tell you there is a trap door underneath your feet which, if you don't behave, will open up and swallow you and take your sinful self straight to the fires of Hades. Please excuse me, but I happen to believe God is more merciful than Jerry Falwell. Please excuse me, but I happen to believe God

is more merciful than Pat Robertson. Please excuse me, but I happen to believe God is more merciful than Charles Stanley. Please excuse me, but I happen to believe, that yes, God is more merciful than even Billy Graham. Please excuse me but I happen to believe God is a God of extravagant grace, endless, eternal grace, amazing grace, and it is my belief that God will not stop even in our next life until every single human being is saved.

Can true love ever end? Does grace really have limits? Would the God revealed in Jesus ever give up on anybody? Is God really a quitter? Or is God like a basketball player who makes every single shot or a baseball player who gets on base on every time or a Carowinds visitor who has to rent a U-Haul to take the stuffed animals home.

I know. I know. Hell and judgement day are thoroughly anchored in the Bible, they are plastered on the pages of “the Church’s Book”. True enough. Actually, though, the old theology in the old Testament was that everybody died and went to a place called Sheol, and your going there had nothing to do with whether you were good or bad, saved or not. Sheol wasn’t a city with gold streets and neither was it a fiery furnace. Sheol was below the surface of the earth (Ezk. 31:15, 17; Ps. 86:13), a place of dust (Jb. 17:16), darkness (Jb. 10:21), silence (Ps. 94:17) and forgetfulness (Ps. 88:12). So if you want to be biblical one option you have is to believe in Sheol.

Another option is to believe God is going to send some to heaven and some to hell. That’s the traditional, often preached scheme.

A third biblical option is to believe, as I do, that everyone will be saved. That everyone will be saved is in the Bible may surprise you. Haven’t heard any sermons along this line, have you? But the idea that everyone will be saved, although a minority view in the Bible, is in there nevertheless. It’s in there and it’s not just Luke 15. Listen to these much neglected texts.

Psalm 22:27. All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him.

All! Did you hear that?

Psalm 145:8-10. The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All you have made will praise you, O Lord.

All! Did you hear that?

Isaiah 25:6. On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples.

All! Did you hear that?

Joel 2:28. I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

All! Did you hear that?

Zephaniah 3:9. Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder.

Do you understand the meaning of *all* or do I need to define it for you?

Isaiah 45:23. Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.

All---I mean every. Did you hear that?

And let's not forget the New Testament.

Matthew 12:50. Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. Not whoever walks the aisle or believes this or that, but whoever does the will of my Father in heaven.

Matthew 18:14. Your Father in heaven is not willing----is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

We were all a little one at one point and time, weren't we?

Mark 11:7. My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations. There's that word again.

Luke 3:6. All humankind will see God's salvation.

John 3:17. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world.

John 10:16. I have other sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

John 12:32. When I am lifted up----when I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.

John 15:16. You did not choose me, but I chose you.

Stay with me now. You've heard the hell, fire and damnation stuff for so long you need to know the other side. I know this is a lot of Bible verses for liberals to listen to but stay with me.

Acts 3:21. Christ must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.

To restore everything, everything and everybody.

And Romans 3:23. We memorized the "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God", but it's also "all are justified freely by his grace. . . ."

Romans 5:18. The result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life to all people.

Romans 8:38-39. I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything in all of creation, will be able to separate us-----will be able to separate us from the love of God.

Romans 11:32. God has bound all people over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on everyone.

1 Corinthians 15:22. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

Ephesians 1:9-10. He made known to us the mystery of his will. . .to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

Philippians 2:10-11. At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

1 Timothy 4:10. We have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

And Revelation 21:25. On no day will heaven's gates be shut, for there will be no night there.

Heaven's gates will never be shut. I believe that. I believe that because of Luke 15. I believe that because of all these other scripture texts. But I believe that mainly because I believe a loving God does not limit or cut off love. I believe a loving God has eternal, everlasting love, a love that never quits, a love that will not accept defeat, a love that will save everyone.

If you think I'm just some flaming liberal preacher who has lost his marbles, who has gone off the deep end with this idea that all will be saved, if you think I'm just grasping for straws or that I'm way out in the corn patch or off my rocker, I need to inform you I'm in good company. Origen, who was born in 185 and was one of the first great theologians of the early Church, and Jerome, who in 382 translated the Greek Bible into Latin, both of these "giants" in the early Church believed everyone be saved. They even believed God would ultimately be reconciled with Satan. There's more. Gregory of Nyssa, a leader of the early Church, a big bishop, who was born around 385 also believed God was going to have an on base percentage of 1000. So you see, with this theology that everyone is going to be saved it's not just me who feels this way.

But everyone?, you ask. Do you really mean everyone will be saved? What about Hitler? No way he's getting in.

Yes, when someone talks about universalism, the idea that all will be saved, invariably the Hitler question comes up. And I in no way want to minimize this difficulty. It's hard for even a universalist like me to deal with God not punishing Hitler. But-----but if grace is not for all, how and where does a loving God draw the line? If grace is not for all judgment turns out to be a very messy proposition.

In their book *If Grace Is True*, Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland tell a story about a woman named Betty.

Betty was a worn woman who lived in a broken-down house with five large dogs, several cats, her son who had AIDS, and a man to whom she wasn't married. Betty was a mess. And yet she presented herself for church membership. What would people think if we allowed her to join our church? Instead of welcoming her, I told her she needed to get her life together. She needed to become a good person, I told her.

Betty went away sad. She never again asked to join the church. Over the next few years, I ran into Betty time and again. She was always gracious to me. She was often carrying some animal she'd found abandoned, which she'd care for until she could find it a home. Other times she was returning from helping some neighbor. When the woman down the street came down with cancer, Betty spent hours caring for her. I learned one day that one of her children was severely handicapped and that she drove a hundred miles to visit him nearly every week.

Betty, like many others I've described in this book, challenged my easy judgments about who is good and who is bad. I discovered fewer and fewer people were truly wicked. My reservation list for hell continued to shrink. Hell became the destiny only of those who had committed themselves completely and totally to evil---Adolph Hitler and the like.

Then I became involved in prison ministry. I remember the day I was preaching at the jail and realized one of the faces was familiar. It was a man who I'd read about in the newspaper. He'd sexually abused his child and then killed him. When it came time for prayer requests, he rose and tearfully asked us to pray for God to work in his life. I was shocked that God was still at work in this wicked man. Didn't some deeds require God to turn away? Didn't Hitler deserve to be thrown into the fire?

I once would have happily allowed them to burn. That no longer brings me joy. The only fire I desire for the wicked is the purifying fire of God's love.

So writes Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland.

Take a close look at the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. You and I may very well be that older brother wanting people not to get grace, but to get what they have coming to them.----- Take a look at that older brother, like most so-called Christians, we may believe in grace for ourselves, but not for everybody.

All will be saved. Does that mean we should live any old way we want to not fearful of punishment? No, if you act any old way you will pay for it. O.K, not everybody pays for their sins on earth. I'll grant you that. Some people do some rotten stuff and what goes around does not come back to them. There are some exceptions, but what I've noticed is that most people most of the time doing whatever the hell they want to do make their own lives hell and make the lives of those around them hell. And believe, that is punishment enough. That indeed is a real sort of hell.

The prodigal son----make no mistake about it---he was living in a kind of hell on earth. And make no mistake about it---the way he lived made life hell for his father and his brother.

There are consequences to our actions, but----but there is no action or deed that will make God stop loving you or me. No bad deed done that will God stop loving every human being.

Do you know when I first started loving my son, Will? It was not the day he climbed into my lap and said, "Daddy". It was not when he was in elementary school and wrote an essay about me titled "My Hero". It was not the day he did a great imitation of his mother. It was not even the day he was born and I heard his first cry. No, I started loving my son while walking down a New York City street holding the hand of my bride of ten years and she said, "I'm sick as a dog. I think I'm pregnant."

Such is the love of God. God has loved us from the very beginning and God will love us forever.