

## Grace Robbers and Joy Thieves

Luke 18:9-14; Hebrews 13:17; Matt. 11:29-30

The German philosopher Schopenhauer compared the human race to a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter's night. He said, "The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth's winter eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness."

This is a pessimistic comment about humans. Fortunately God has given us an alternative through the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. God's grace provides another option to this pessimistic quote. As we soak in God's grace, seek more of His grace, recognize our need for grace more, extend God's grace to each other, and allow ourselves to receive grace; we can then live in the fullness of the kingdom of God. Grace allows us to stay together and keep warm. Grace gives us power to mature and grow in the Christian life. Jesus' grace becomes the bond that ties us together in ways that uplift, encourage, and empower us to live even more in God's grace.

I agree with the editor of the Gospel Herald who wrote, "Besides the occasional song, grace was not something I heard much about in my youth. Sermons didn't dwell on it, nor was it the subject of any heated Sunday school class discussions that I can remember. Why?"

Robert Friedmann, historian and writer about the Anabaptist movement, finds one answer in our roots. 'How to find a gracious God was not a major concern of the Anabaptists. The new Anabaptists already had a glorious experience of regeneration or spiritual rebirth. Their concern was to be practical about that regeneration: they desired to walk in the footsteps of the Master.'

From those beginnings in the 16th century have come words like obedience, discipleship, and discipline - terms we Mennonites continue to discuss and analyze. As we should. To lose sight that faith must be backed up by our lives is to preach an unsound gospel. But so is ignoring the

assumption behind the early Anabaptist concern for discipline and action: God's grace."

I think somehow as we go along in our Christian lives, religious people have a tendency to focus on obligations, duty, shoulds, and oughts. This in a certain sense is natural as we want to maintain who we are and keep ourselves on the straight and narrow. But as we do this we develop habits that defeat the very purpose of the kingdom of God. We can become self-righteous and judgmental instead of humble and gracious. We become like the Pharisee instead of the Publican.

Let's read Luke 18:9-14.

Somehow unconsciously we begin to develop the attitude of this Pharisee toward other people. We even start thinking this way about our brothers and sisters in Christ. If you disagree with me, ask yourself, "Do I spend more of my time praising and affirming traits, ideas, and actions of my brothers & sisters in Christ, than I criticize them?"

Reflect on your habits and ask: "Do my words and thoughts, encourage, affirm and lift up people more than I am putting them down?" I suspect that most of us if we are honest would have to say, "I spend too much time grouching about my fellow Christians than I do affirming them." Maybe I am wrong, but I have a sneaking suspicion that it is too easy for us as religious persons to be more often like the Pharisee than the tax collector in the parable. So we need to work at this.

I suspect we know what we should do, more than we know what we actually do. We know Jesus frees us, and that freedom is a response to grace. But I keep being bugged to examine how we shut off grace from each other. So the title of this sermon is grace robbers - joy thieves. When we have the attitude of the Pharisee what happens is we become grace robbers. We steal joy from each other. We usually don't do it on purpose, but things just pop out that create a climate of fear, unease, distrust, judgementalism and so on.

We don't usually expect to find robbers and thieves in the church. But they are there. They

don't carry guns, but they are joy thieves. They suck the life, the fun, the vitality out of the church. So let's look at some ways joy thieves function.

One type of grace robber is the **pessimist**. Their negative words and attitudes can neutralize the hopes and dreams we carry. They can stop the flow of ideas before they even begin. They can cut off the work of the Holy Spirit almost single-handedly. Instead of being a grace giver who generously gives people space to talk, reflect, make decisions, grow, room to change, and experiment, a grace robber throws a confining wet blanket over people.

Then there is the **pouter**. The pouter never confronts, only pouts. We're not aware anything is wrong until suddenly the atmosphere cools. The pouter holds a grudge, often for years, and everyone begins to feel something isn't quite right, but can't get a handle on what's wrong. Maybe the pouter was hurt, or misunderstood, or not paid attention to, or is embarrassed, or blames others, or feels guilty, or whatever. And instead of dealing with their problem, internally and / or externally, they pout.

They never address openly their reason for pouting. They seldom examine their own feelings and thinking. But their pouting attitude affects the whole congregation. The joy is gradually eroded. Instead of being a grace giver, by confessing or talking to the person who offended them, the pouter holds on to and enjoys their pouting. But this damages the spiritual health of the pouter and the health of the congregation the pouter is in.

Another joy thief is the **perfectionist**. This person believes that crossing every t, dotting every i, and splitting every hair is of greater importance than building bridges or cultivating friendships. The scrutiny of the perfectionist can make even the most familiar task a tedious trail of eggshells. And then we wonder why people are not willing to volunteer or stick out their necks. Grace givers instead give people room to succeed and to fail. This allows people to grow, learn, experiment, do things in a new way, and try to find their gifts.

Have you ever run into someone who is a real kill

joy? The **more-spiritual-than-thou thief** sees faith and fun as incompatible. Should the pastor have fun, this thief wishes the pastor would take the calling more seriously. If the congregation laughs too much in worship they are not spiritual enough. Religion is seen as serious business where joy and laughter is a sign of worldliness and sin. The inability to laugh at ourselves, at the humor in living, to do things in fun, to be creative, try new things, is the image many churches project in the world. Many unbelievers I think are surprised when they attend a church that can combine seriousness with fun, faith with joy. The more-spiritual-than-thou thief kills the joy of everyone around. They sap the energy right out of worship, meetings, and fellowship.

Another kind of joy thief is the **know-it-all**. This person has everything to teach and nothing to learn. They are the self-appointed "mom" or "coach" of the whole world. They are usually too busy telling everyone what they should do that they miss considering God's grace at work in any given situation.

Or they are the kind of grace robber that **demand** **everyone has to agree with them**. They have the attitude of "The only right answer is the one I am giving you and for you to be right with God you have to agree with me and do what I say."

The know it all and the you have to agree with me person, give no space to others. Their attitudes and words and actions crowd out everyone else. They want control. Have you ever been on a committee with someone you work ***for***, instead of work ***with***? There is a big difference isn't there?

These persons also are the joy thieves who are **never wrong**. Because they know it all and are never wrong, everyone just naturally should agree with them. Right? Too many church members gracefully agree, stay silent, bow out, or avoid disagreeing in order not to have conflict. When they do these things, church life and individuals, spiritual lives, become stifled, fearful, and imprisoned. Joy thieves suffocate a congregation.

But grace givers understand that everyone needs space to express themselves, to talk and be heard.

Givers of grace listen more and include others in decision making and activities. They recognize that life has lots of gray areas. Grace givers know that there is more than one way to do things.

All of us have run into the **I expect more of you person**. The joy bandit may or may not be involved in the church, but let a need arise in his life, and he expects your undivided attention, right now! This person may hold the title of chief critic in the church. She is always there to pick up on any little thing and blow it up. Nothing is ever done well enough to suit them. When his children get into trouble it is the school's fault instead of his. When she wants to use the church, other scheduled events don't count. The I-expect-more-of-you person expects immediate service with a money back guarantee. This kind of grace robber just drains enthusiasm & energy out of the church.

A last kind of grace robber and joy thief we will look at is the person who **makes a moral value out of something where there is no moral value**. Some people have a tendency to take a position, which is fine, but then they take it to the extreme and say this is the only moral way to go. An example is the person who says hymns are the only right, moral, best, ethical, legal, and valid type of singing to take place in church. They use the negative term, "throw up music."

On the flip side there are those who believe that short scripture choruses are the only way God wants us to sing. The tendency for religious people is to take their personal preference and make it into a moral equivalent for everyone. In other words, "My belief is the best and only valid one." My experience should be for everyone." There are many things in life that are not moral. But we tend to make them moral battlefields.

There are many other kinds of joy thieves. Like those who complain but never contribute. Those who see their spiritual gift as criticism. Those who never speak up in meetings, but outside the meeting sabotage the decision in various ways. There are those who are never responsible for making decisions or not making decisions. Then there are those who use think, "my family built this building," & demand their way. I am sure

each of us can add to this list out of your own experiences. Remember, grace robbers only get away with their way of operating because congregations allow it. Plus, sometimes congregations can be too graceful and generous, to the detriment of all involved.

In the past when the idea to have Sunday School started, many people loved the idea. Others reacted sharply against it. In the past some really wanted to have organs and pianos in the church. Others left the church when an organ or piano was put in the sanctuary. But neither of these two issues is mentioned in the Bible. A church is not less spiritual or morally corrupt if they have Sunday School or do not have Sunday School. A church is not better or worse if they have an organ or not. Too often religious people take stands that say, there is a moral issue that I will fight for to the death, and God is scratching his head and wondering "Where's grace?" Why can't we be appropriate generous spirits toward each other?

So what do we do with these joy thieves? The normal reaction is to put robbers behind bars. But Christians do not want revenge. We'd rather see the redemption of relationship so that the kingdom of God can flourish. God values every soul. Each of us in some way has been a joy thief. So we need to take a hard look at ourselves and consider – am I stealing someone's joy by not being grace filled and rightly generous? Am I helping the church atmosphere or am I polluting it? Each of us at some time has been robbed of grace and have stolen someone's grace. So what are we to do?

**First**, we must not pamper joy thieves. This means we cannot pamper ourselves. We are our own worst enemy. Our biggest mistake is to pamper grace robbers because when we do, they keep robbing us of our joy. We have to choose between ignoring them, confronting them, and at times setting up ways of working together that get around the tactics of grace robbers. Each of these ways needs to be considered in each situation. I cannot emphasize enough that the spiritual, relational, and witness health of a congregation is at stake. We cannot allow the glory of God to be diminished by any type of joy thief. Way too many congregations actually cater to bullies of

various types. And then wonder why things don't get better and why the church doesn't grow.

**Second**, we need to prayerfully consider the words of Hebrews 13:17 which say, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing - for that would be harmful to you." This isn't just aimed at the pastor. This doesn't mean blind obedience. It does imply godly leadership. And godly followership. It does suggest that we check ourselves to see if we are using tactics that keep each other from being free. Are we making those in roles of church leadership fun and meaningful or stress filled and unfulfilling? Are we doing things or not doing things in ways that steal joy? Are we taking grace out of our lives by our actions, attitudes, words and habits? And part of leadership and followership is not having attitudes, actions and words that steal grace from people.

Leadership has been a very popular topic in the church, in business and in any group. But few consider our first calling as believers of Jesus is to be – followers. When have you heard an appeal to be a follower – much less what a good healthy follower is? But the majority of seminars advertise themselves for leadership! What about mutual followership? Mutual servanthood?

Having worked in quite a few congregations in various roles, I can say, that sometime I have been there because the leader – a pastor or lay leader mishandled themselves of a situation. But in a surprising number of situations, it's a few followers who are the ones I would consider the bigger problems. Unless they change, the next pastor is also short term. It should not surprise us that the healthy followers and leaders leave and look for a healthier church. And at times, it's both followers & leaders that suck the joy out of congregational life. So we all have to do better.

The **third** response to joy thieves is found in Matthew 11:29-30. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

The translation by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, has an intriguing phrase. He says, "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

The phrase, "learn the unforced rhythms of grace," jumps out at me. As we learn the unforced rhythms of grace we learn how not to be joy thieves. We learn not to be grace robbers. We learn how to extend grace to each other instead of being like the Pharisee, judgmental, proud, and thinking himself better than others. We learn to be generous in spirit and attitudes toward each other. Let's be a congregation that gives the gift of grace to others.

As we grow in grace we don't need to force ourselves to extend grace. We recognize how much grace we receive and we pass it on - willingly, lovingly, and joyfully. We create a positive, efficient first class grace oriented culture that offers grace and carries out these three responses to joy thieves. We learn how not to be grace robbers. And we learn how to not to let joy thieves steal the church's joy because the spiritual, emotional, mental, relational and witness health of the congregation is at stake.

And let's not, as the favorite hymn, "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy," by Frederick Faber declares in verse 3: *We make His love too narrow, By false limits of our own; And we magnify His strictness, With a zeal God will not own.*

May we grow in what it really means to love. Come let's keep company with each other and we'll keep learning to live freely and lightly, within the unforced rhythm of grace.