

The Problem with Nutshells

By adminlen On April 11, 2013 · Add Comment



Most everyone is familiar with the figure of speech “in a nutshell.” I suppose the phrase, which usually refers to someone’s explanation of a concept in a short and simple way, was coined as a colorful way to describe something so short that if written down it could be contained in, yes, a nutshell. I’ve never learned what particular nut might have been in the mind of the coiner, but personally I suspect peanut shells. Why? You ask – well, they’re easy to crack open but hard to clean up, look great on the outside but often conceal shriveled up insides that are inedible, and definitely need to be roasted and seasoned with salt to give them some interest. And some people are deadly allergic to them. Don’t get me wrong: I love peanuts and have spent many

happy hours devouring them, especially at baseball games, when you can blithely toss them on the ground with reckless abandon. Of course, that also produces a slipping hazard. *sigh*

Anyway, all of these things lead me to the problem with “nutshell” definitions of important truths. They might be easy to carry around and share, but are often less than satisfying, and can even be downright dangerous. A prime example is the way folks understand and talk about the Bible’s teaching concerning God’s grace. Oh sure, the nutshell definition “undeserved favor” has its usefulness, and it is true enough. But that definition just doesn’t go either deep or broad enough. We’re usually willing to acknowledge that we have received Christ’s favor without any merit on our part, but then inexplicably live as if our happiness and freedom from shame are dependent upon our performance. If we really *serve* enough, if we really *suffer* enough, if we really *prove* somehow that we’ve *really* gotten the message, then we’ll feel good about that grace. But that attitude betrays that we actually don’t understand what grace is, and what it implies. At our fallen core we still want to be the hero that saves ourselves, all the while nobly nodding in God’s direction with appreciation that he has given us a break. Fooling ourselves with this nutshell version only enslaves our hearts to our weakness, rather than providing the freedom we have been promised through the power of Christ.

What does living with a true understanding a grace look like? I can think of no better example than King David. Here you have a man who had God’s Spirit poured into him, a man set in high places, gifted, clever, capable, even handsome. It’s easy for such a person to understand grace as just those blessings that he was enjoying. But David’s understanding of grace is shown to be much deeper when he sins, and sins badly (2 Samuel 11, 12; Psalm 51). Upon repentance, he was forgiven. Disciplined, he was not crushed. Experiencing the consequences that inevitably accompanied his sinful acts, he nonetheless managed to live in freedom and joy, as if the sin had never happened (at least, as far as it affected his relationship with God is concerned). His psalms overflow with that joy and confidence. It’s amazing! How could he do that? Didn’t he know that mere repentance isn’t enough? That discipline doesn’t cut it? That you really have to suffer a long time before God’s full restoration kicks in? (Not sure how long that’s supposed to be, but somehow we’ll know when it’s time.) What right did he have to be happy in his walk with God, or in life at all? Maybe there’s something to that purgatory thing after all.

Actually, there’s nothing biblical about that kind of thinking. Christ bore the shame of our sin, paid our debt, and told us that in him we are “free indeed” (John 8:36). And when we sin again and again, he points to that payment again and again, and restores us to full fellowship immediately with no reservations: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Even when appropriate discipline and consequences follow that are hard to walk through, there is still freedom and joy in our relationship with him as we see those difficulties as simply tools in the loving hand of our Savior to further refine us. After we’re forgiven he doesn’t put us on the rack, so to speak, just to make sure we get the message so we can do something else that really satisfies our holy God. The debt is satisfied by him. THAT is what grace is all about, and that is truly liberating. Not only is it liberating to our souls, it also means that God continues to bless us in our lives, too, and bring glory to himself in spite of our sins. Back to David: though his sins regarding Uriah and Bathsheba were utterly reprehensible, and numerous dire consequences necessarily followed, his relationship with God was restored when he repented and cast himself upon God’s mercy. God continued to use David in mighty ways as David corrected his behavior and righted wrongs, and Solomon was the result...not to mention a long while later, our Lord Jesus Christ

the eternal Davidic king who fulfills all of God's promises. I would hasten to add that I am not condoning sinning "that grace may abound!" ([Romans 6:1](#)) I am urging that we rest in his grace and not pretend that somehow we'll be happier if we just continue to wallow in a false self-abasement that insults Christ's finished work of redemption upon the cross.

Grasping the enormous truth of God's grace, however, goes beyond what God exercises towards us. We get some hints that more is involved in the concept in such passages as Christ's instructions about prayer when he tells us to pray "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Do we really comprehend what we're praying for with that request? I wonder sometimes what would happen to us if the Lord's grace went down to the standard of our grace toward others. The thought is not comforting. The Lord's words to the Ephesian church in [Revelation 2:2-5](#) ought to send chills up our spines as we think about how we too often treat others who are caught by the snares of sin:

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent."

This passage is often interpreted to mean that the Ephesians had ceased to love Christ. But to me that doesn't make any sense in the context. Christ commended them for their zeal for him and his truth! But they were apparently beating up on each other, using discipline as a club. They had become so zealous for their understanding of truth that they had forgotten about their obligation, and former love, toward their brethren. They were disciplining, alright, but without compassion, holding sinners to a graceless standard. They were damaging tender souls who certainly needed to be corrected, but who also needed restoration and the love of the body. They had forgotten their own fallen state from which they had been delivered, and were in danger of the Lord disciplining them in turn by removing their testimony from the world. Seeing what happened subsequently in history to the church and the entire city of Ephesus ought to make us sit up and take sober notice.

When asked by Peter how many times he should forgive those who wronged him, Jesus' answer was stunning, "I say not seven times, but countless (literally, *seventy seven*) times" ([Matthew 18:22](#)). This was in contrast to the Jewish limitation of seven times, reflecting the attitude that at some point we should say, "Enough already!" and refuse to show grace and mercy to others who harm us. Jesus' grace is better, don't you think?

Consider Paul's instructions in [2 Corinthians 2:5-11](#) concerning the disciplined sinner in their midst. He writes, "Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you." No question about it, sin hurts the entire body, and that particular man's sin was disgusting and perverse. But note what follows: "For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him." Paul goes on to say that this is a matter of obedience to thwart Satan's devices aimed at destroying souls. Yet in spite of a passage like this one that is so clear that no explanation is really necessary, talking about discipline in most American evangelical churches these days will usually get you a shudder, or a horror story about how someone was run out on a rail rather than shown true godly grace and restored to full, unconditional fellowship. No wonder so many churches just don't discipline anymore. The damage to the Church and its testimony is incalculable, in part because we've been content with a nutshell definition of grace.

So let's not slip and fall on nutshells. Even in this fairly long post, I've really just found a bigger nutshell to put these thoughts in, I realize! This is just a beginning. Let's pursue and embrace the full definition, rejoicing in the grace that God has shown to us and its freedom, and demonstrating that grace to one another with love, humility, and patience. It won't fit in a nutshell, but it will sure be satisfying.