

# Soul Spark: Session 4



## God of Grace

### What is grace for you?

Often when asking this question of a group of Soul Spark participants ‘there is a sense of slight panic and silence before the words began to flow. One reply was ‘it’s too good to be true.’ And yes we all smiled and agreed because it is too good, too good to be defined with a few words. Yet through our lived experience we have received, touched, tasted and known moments and times of grace in ways that are beyond words. Within those moments we somehow know deeply the gift of grace and grow in our desire to live by grace.

We may each have a definition of what grace is about, which will change and grow as we journey with God and allow grace to impact our lives. Our image of the grace-giver will greatly influence this deep inner desire to live by grace.

Our image of God impacts us profoundly. It will affect how we pray, how we behave and how we are with others. Our image of God is important to all aspects of our life. As has been said, “we become like the God we adore”.<sup>1</sup> We live with a mixture of helpful and unhelpful images, some of which we may not even be conscious of until we take the time to stop, reflect and become aware of what drives or draws us in our life.

Some images of God reinforce the need to justify ourselves by what we do or achieve, while others affirm justification by the grace of God. It is important to look at the images that we live with (often unconsciously) and ponder which are of ‘works’ and which are of ‘grace’? The sense of a distant but critically watchful God waiting to point his finger at any wrongs like a policeman in the sky reinforces the need for justification by works – to keep him happy. The sense of a God like a generous loving grandparent ready to accept and listen to whatever needs to be shared, offering love, understanding, encouragement and support on the other hand reinforces the sense of grace and allows for a loving response.

### The Dynamic Cycle

Frank Lake’s Dynamic Cycle<sup>2</sup> can be very helpful to look at life and see the underlying drives and helps see how the God of grace meets us there. The Dynamic Cycle has four stages, acceptance, sustenance, status and achievement.

Lake identifies the earthly life of Jesus beginning with **acceptance**. Jesus was received and accepted from birth (we could say at conception) by Mary and Joseph into an environment of unconditional and affirming love. Perhaps the most important moment of acceptance and affirmation of unconditional love for Jesus for us to dwell on, as we consider grace, is that

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn, *Good Goats: Healing our image of God* (Paulist Press, 1994)

<sup>2</sup> The Dynamic Cycle from Frank Lake, *Clinical Theology* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986) forms the foundation for this way into exploring images of God. The web resources include a detailed description of this and a handout. David Runcorn, *Touch Wood* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992) has a helpful chapter on this.

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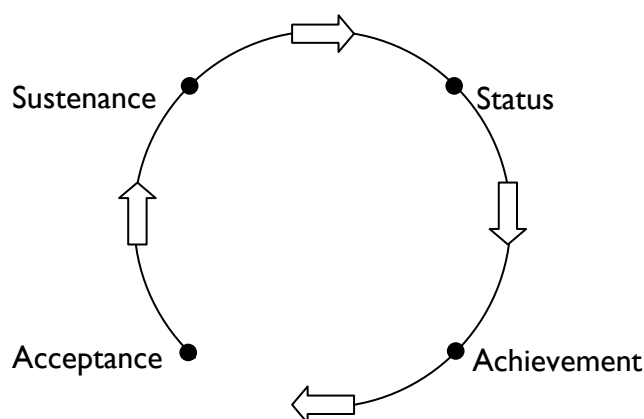
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given from his heavenly Father at his Baptism – ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’ This occurs *before* Jesus began his ministry. There have been no miracles or teaching, yet God is delighted in who he is, wanting him to know and experience this in all its’ fullness.

The result of acceptance produces is a sense of well being, of being **sustained** for who you are, which enables a confidence and freedom to explore life, to seek goals and to be motivated towards ideas and people. Jesus’ sense of well being is sustained through prayer and his relationship with his Father as he experiences this in living out his life, exploring what it means to be who he is, and in each step that is taken in his ministry, in his teaching, healing, and miracles he is the discovery of the sustaining love and acceptance of his heavenly Father, which in turn enables Jesus’ greater trust and confidence.

Acceptance and sustenance enables an outward movement towards action and other people that arises out of a sense of **significance**. Jesus grew through this in his ongoing sense of identity and purpose, knowing who he was and who he was called to become. In the synagogue in Nazareth Jesus is able to read from Isaiah ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me’ and comment ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled’ because he has found this sense of his significance. John’s Gospel at the washing of the feet shows Jesus’ sense of his significance ‘Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God’ (John 13.3) and in the next chapter saying ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ (John 14.6).

Acting out of the sense of significance – of doing what you are meant to do, leads (almost as a by-product) to **achievement**. Jesus’ achievement is fulfilment of his purpose. His ultimate achievement was faithfulness and the cross.



The Dynamic Cycle – the flow of Grace

It is this process that Lake calls the dynamic cycle which describes the flow of grace in human life, which begins with acceptance that develops and is built up through an ongoing sustenance, to establishing a status that is humble rather than overbearing and enables achievements that serve a higher purpose than person gain.

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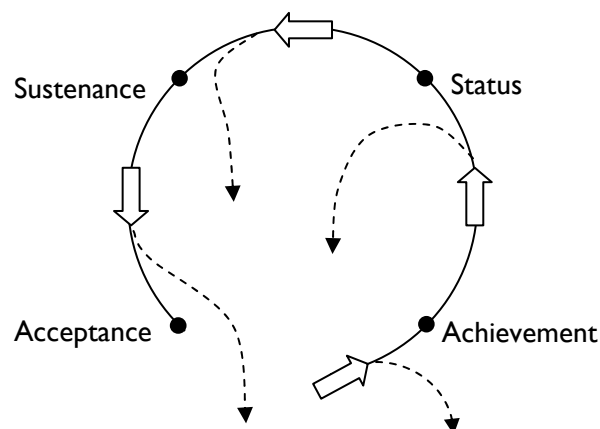
Jesus shows the way of living by grace which invites us to seek to live from the acceptance of being loved for who we are, rather than what we do. This is often so hard for us to receive and we can find ourselves fighting against the gift of grace: 'the worst in me has been accepted as well as the most loveliest in me'. With acceptance of divine love, change and transformation is possible. Accepted as we are means we no longer need to measure up to the expectations and standards of others and ourselves.

Unfortunately we are taught to go around the cycle the opposite way. We live in a society that constantly compares, is full of grades and expectations, and is driven to achieve in so many areas of life. So we are expected and taught to justify ourselves by works. Even within our churches we may feel that we do not quite measure up to the expectations we think others and God have of us.

We can become aware of our drivenness to achieve or gain status, either by being confronted with our failures or as we reflect on our inner attitudes and become more aware of what is motivating us. These can be recognised by thought patterns like:

- Am I hoping I'll feel better about myself if I do... (status from achievement)
- I'll be accepted by X if I do... (acceptance from achievement)
- Once I have done this, I will be happy and at peace (which never happens)
- Or messages from others like:
  - If you do this (achievement)...we will give you promotion (status)....
  - Doing this will make you feel better about yourself (well-being)....
  - Think of how people will respect you once you have achieved... (which is never quite what it seems)

Struggling to achieve some fail, working for status others are hurt and striving for well being is costly often bringing a sense of low self-esteem, rejection and worthlessness. It can be harmful to body and soul. Especially if we keep going anti grace-wise. There can be casualties (co-workers, family, friends and self) in all stages as we struggle to justify ourselves by what we do.



The cycle – movement by works showing its casualties

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Where is God in relation to all of this? We have the choice to continue striving or to accept the invitation of the cross as the turning place of grace in the cycle. The cross, Jesus' greatest achievement puts Jesus amongst the failures of the drivenness of the world. Jesus gives himself, coming alongside to be a comfort and healer accepting a wounded and broken world.

It is here that the place of failure is becomes the place where new life can begin, where so-called failure is redeemed. The harmful cycle of living by works is broken Gods gift of mercy, compassion and love. This extravagant, creative love enables the deep desire to live by grace to be once again fanned to a flame. So we are taken deeper into the love of God and into the movement of grace.

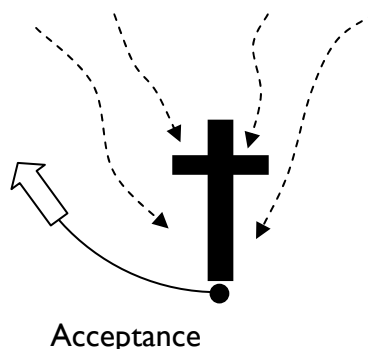


Diagram 3- movement of redeeming grace

It is not always easy to trust that God truly offers this way of life - a way that redeems failure, affirms us as we are and draws us into fulfilling our purposes. It's too good to be true – its this difficulty to trust that asks us to reflect on the image of God that causes us to be like this.

Our image of God the grace giver and our perception God's view of us and others affects our daily choices. Asking ourselves "Who is the God I come to in prayer?" can help us recognise where the God of grace is for us. Moment by moment we are offered and can chose the way of living by grace or not. No one can truly know God, the mystery remains, but we do catch new glimpses as we open ourselves to let go of images that drive us and accept the healing of grace.