

**“How God Enables Us to Grow”  
Hebrews 4:12–16  
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It is October, and for some churches — not ours, thank goodness — this means spending a lot of energy on how to address the “issues” raised by Halloween. Should Christians participate? Aren’t we making light of evil? Shouldn’t we do something different to make a statement? Years ago, in Kentucky, as an alternative to trick-or-treating, a Baptist pastor designed a service for a Sunday night in late October in which he took people on a tour through hell. I assume it was imaginary, I never went, but I was always curious about how he knew what was there. Had he been? There is very little in scripture about hell. Most of the images people have come from various literary sources, though many people think they are biblical. Thank you, Dante Alighieri!

But this basic approach of trying to frighten people into embracing faith has a long history in the church. Eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards’ sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is one of the best-known examples. It is viewed to have been a catalyst for the First Great Awakening. But what exactly does this approach awaken? Jesus does bring grace and truth, but can fear move people closer to a loving God? Someone has said that we can worship the devil out of fear. Only things like grace and love can motivate authentic faith.

Considering all of today’s texts, but focusing on the reading from Hebrews, it seems that when God seeks growth in our lives, grace is always involved. Each of these texts contains a clear word of challenge. Amos has a strong word of judgment for those who take advantage of the poor in the marketplace and the court system. God expects better. Jesus tells a man who is wealthy that following the basic commandments is not enough, he must sell everything he has and give the proceeds to the poor. He tells his disciples it will be hard for those who have wealth

to enter the kingdom of God, harder than it would be for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. The author of Hebrews says the word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

There is a word of challenge in every one of these texts, but there is also a word of grace. Seek the Lord and live, Amos says, seek good and not evil, establish justice in the gate and God will be gracious. For mortals, it may be impossible to enter God's realm, Jesus says, but for God all things are possible. We have a great high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because he has been tested like us, says the author of Hebrews, so let us approach the throne of grace with boldness — *parresia* in the Greek — so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

There are words of challenge in these texts, but they are surrounded by grace, not fear. Put another way, it is grace that enables us to hear and embrace the words of challenge in the first place. Because we know we are loved and nothing can take away this love, we are freed to hear the words of challenge. God's love is like a safety net that allows us to attempt more in the great high-wire act of life.

I have shared with some of you before a story that a son told at his father's memorial service at the church I served in Winston-Salem. And lest anyone think this was clearly a mischievous child who needed to be punished, not coddled, I should tell you that he became a professor and Associate Vice-Provost at Duke University.

One day when he was young, he was practicing his karate kicks in the basement of his home which doesn't sound too bad, but he didn't take karate lessons and he practiced by kicking the basement window. The inevitable eventually happened. He broke the window and then had to report his misadventure to his father.

His father was mowing the grass at the time, so he had to get his attention first and then tell him what he had done which simply added to his embarrassment. When his father finally heard him, he looked at him crossly and said, "WHAT!?" but not in a shaming way, more out of confusion. Surely he had misheard his son. The son repeated his message, and his father could tell he was serious but also embarrassed,

so he simply said, “Okay.” He never mentioned it again. He could have lectured or scolded him, but he didn’t. He just fixed the window.

That’s grace, a parental judgment that in this case the self-awareness and embarrassment were punishment enough. It wasn’t an act of permissiveness that turned the son into a monster. It was a wise act of love chosen by a father who knew when grace was needed.

It was an accurate description of that father, and it is an image of the way God often works in our lives. God knows we need truth, but God knows we need grace even more, and many times we can hear the truth a lot better in the context of grace. That is, we can find the courage to examine a part of our lives that needs attention once we know that whatever is going on will not and cannot separate us from God’s love, which the Apostle Paul, writing to the church at Rome, tells us nothing in this world can do (Romans 8:35-39).

When God seeks growth in our lives, grace is involved, but so is a word of challenge. This too is seen in all of our texts, including the reading from Hebrews. The author presents an image of the word of God as a sword cutting through joints and marrow, separating what is noble and true from what is cheap and false. We could use that kind of sword today in a world that is filled with false and hateful words. The author goes on to say that the word of God — certainly Holy Scripture but perhaps also the Living Word, Jesus — is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart so that we are completely exposed to God. We may be able to hide things from each other, perhaps at times even from ourselves, but there is nothing we can hide from God who is our judge.

Only an arrogant person who is completely lacking in self-awareness could hear this and not feel at least a bit unsettled, but remember that this word of challenge comes in the context of grace, and know that what this text is saying may not be exactly what we think it is. According to biblical scholar Jesper Svartvik, the Greek word translated as judge — *kritikos* — from which we get the word “critical” is less about condemnation, for which there are other Greek words, than something like what critics provide for literature and art. They do not

put pen to paper, he says, to disapprove. They sift what is good from what is not good, they distinguish, they discern (*The Christian Century*, September 22, 2021, p. 23).

Svartvik goes on to quote philosopher George Santayana who described criticism as “an investigation of what the work is good for... (it divides) the immortal from the mortal part of the soul.” The purpose of God’s word, Svartvik argues, is not to condemn but to commend, to hold up what is good and noble alongside what is not, so that we can pursue the good and noble. God’s intent is to lift us to a nobler path, always in love and in the context of grace.

But sometimes God has to be direct to get our attention. God is honest with us, as God wants us to be honest with God, in an effort to point us to a better life. If a piano teacher really wants to help a student, the teacher cannot say it is okay that the student has not practiced or that the performance is good when it is not. That would either be dishonest or a way of saying, “I don’t think you’ve got much ability anyway, it probably doesn’t matter.” If a coach believes in the ability of an athlete and wants to help that athlete pursue a goal, the coach has to offer words of challenge, sometimes in direct ways. Otherwise, the coach would be saying in effect, “That’s the best you can do with your limited talent.”

In like manner, for God to ignore areas of our lives in need of growth would not be a sign of love. It would be an expression of disdain and perhaps disinterest, neither of which God exhibits toward beloved children. God loves us just as we are. As a mentor of mine once said, there is nothing we can do to make God love us anymore and there is nothing we can do to make God love us any less. But God’s love for us also sees the full potential each of us has, God yearns for us to reach this potential, and God helps us to do so by pointing us toward a better path.

Who are the people who have helped us grow the most in life? Parents and grandparents, teachers and coaches, a supervisor or minister? How did they help us grow? Sometimes it was simply by letting us know we were loved, we mattered, our lives had value and they believed in us. Other times it was because they called attention to something that made us a little uncomfortable, yet somewhere deep down we realized they were right, and because we knew they genuinely

cared about us, we were able to hear what they were saying and make some change in our lives that we needed to make.

My youth minister helped me to grow in both of these ways. Rick grew up in a family a good bit like mine. There was love and care but some dysfunction too, like most families. He knew I had not grown up in church and he knew some of what I faced each day. So he extended love and support with genuine understanding, and he affirmed my initial yearning to know Christ and eventual calling to ministry. But he also cared about me and believed in my potential enough to challenge me at times — like when I received a technical foul in a church league basketball game (Though the other player did start it!) and when I allowed a party to be held at my family’s home.

Real friends don’t let destructive behavior go. Good mentors and guides don’t ignore attitudes and behaviors needing attention. Why would God not care enough about us to point out needed changes? That’s all the readings from Amos, Mark and Hebrews are doing. And they are all doing it in the context of grace. “You need to treat the poor better,” says Amos. “You need to examine your priorities honestly,” says Jesus, “Does anything really matter as much to you as money?” “You need to know that God sees you as you are,” says the author of Hebrews, “there is no hiding.”

The appropriate response to all of these words of challenge, particularly since they are offered in love and surrounded by grace, is, “Thank you!”