Grace: Something Needed in the Modern Age

Grace is a concept on everyone’s mind to some degree or another in this day and age. Even more so with the problems people have coming to a consensus when they sit down and discuss what they believe the concept of grace is and how it is applied to them. Any conversation that is made about grace should begin with the Apostle Paul and his teachings because they are the bases for many of the beliefs that have filtered down through the ages in some form or another. Beliefs that can even be found in the works of novelists like Flannery O’Connor. Because the concept of grace can so readily be found in O’Connor’s works, her works spark many conversations between various critics that have read her works.

As for the many different ways to view grace, a good place to start would actually be with one of the most famous orators and teachers on grace, the Apostle Paul. The main idea that Paul teaches throughout his writings is that grace is the “divine means of help or strength, given through the bounteous mercy and love of Jesus Christ” (Grace). Though, this particular message is more of a culmination of the many principles that Paul spoke of to those that wished to hear about Jesus Christ. An example of the many times that he spoke is when he taught the people of Corinth saying, “But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (King James Version, 1 Corinthians 15). What Paul was proclaiming there was that it was through the divine strength of God that he was there and able to teach the people about Christ. Unfortunately, Paul’s language was not always clear and this has caused much contention over the years about how he was meant to understood, something that he clearly did not mean not intend.
Part of the reason that Paul can be difficult to understand when he spoke on grace can be attributed to the audience that he was speaking to. Or the context of his statements as well as the foundations of his own knowledge and conversion. While some of the time he was speaking to a Christian audience that hailed from gentile conversions, he also spent a decent amount of time speaking to his peers, who were those who were of Jewish heritage and were now followers of Jesus Christ like he was. Though even among the Jews, his experience was different because his conversion to Christianity was based on a personal experience of Christ actually speaking to him. The many problems he faced while trying to keep the various congregations around the world on the straight and narrow would also affect his personal understanding because the converts were constantly trying to change the doctrine to suit their circumstances (Bassler 26). This has caused many misunderstandings that could easily be could be rectified through corroborative research and analysis by various groups working in tandem instead of alone.

Another unique part of Paul’s Jewish and Christian heritage was his unique understanding of the connection between grace and suffering. This understanding came from the first century Jews and their own unique views of life that came from the various trials they went through as a nation. One way that the early Jews viewed suffering was that “suffering could be the grace-filled means by which God led persons to repentance. Suffering could also be the God-given means for individuals to atone for their sins in this world, thereby preserving for themselves a reward in the world to come” (Bassler 27). Though, for Paul the connection between grace and suffering was different from this as evidenced throughout his teachings and statements about how suffering would draw us closer to Christ, therefore allowing us to remember to apply Christ’s Grace.
According to Jouette Bassler, Paul’s stance on the connection of suffering and grace was that a person’s suffering would actually allow them to come to understand and know Christ better if they were able to feel as Christ did when he suffered and atoned for all those who would repent of their sins. They were to “understand their suffering as a gift, not because it has atoning value—only Christ’s death could accomplish that—or because it leads them to repentance, but because it marks their union with Christ and, like the Eucharistic meal, proclaims his death until he returns” (Bassler 28). A stance that many religious people could definitely support if they were made fully aware of it.

The teachings of Paul that are really hard to understand, as Bassler identifies, is where Paul talks about grace in the context of the works of the law, or the New and Everlasting Covenant that Jesus taught. Because of this confusion, many people have come to believe that the law stands in opposition to grace. That is because the “term ‘grace’ has acquired a new connotations, but there is no consensus over the precise nuances of said connotations, for there is no agreement over what Paul means when he uses the opposing term ‘law’” (Bassler 29). This lead to the creation of legalism, or “a system of works-righteousness based on the law, a system that feeds the sin of self-achievement and generates an attitude of boastful arrogance and self-righteousness” (Bassler 29). Although there are some in the academic community that believe that legalism is what Paul meant, Bassler is not one of them. Instead Bassler is of the belief that Paul was instead putting grace in opposition of the ethnic laws of the Jews that kept out members of other ethnicities who sought to become Christians, as Judaism was known to do quite often in that time, rather than in opposition of the New and Everlasting Covenant that Jesus taught. Bassler supports the argument that the law that Paul was setting up to be in opposition of grace was the Jewish ethnic laws. He does this by mentioning that this argument was only brought up...
by Paul when he was speaking to the Romans and the Galatians, both situations having a good number of Gentiles who wanted to convert (Bassler 32). Clearly, this is a perfect example of the problems that happen when scholars and philosophers forget that not everything happens in a vacuum, but instead that every doctrine and teaching are influenced in some way by the context of their situation.

This confusion on the subject of grace can be seen in the literary world in how the Christian author Flannery O’Connor has portrayed and shown the concept of grace in her various short stories. O’Connor’s works seem to fall in line with many of the theories that Paul, and the more contemporarily Bassler, espousing that grace and suffering are connected by bringing us to Christ. A very clear example of this is in O’Connor’s story ‘Revelation’ where Mrs. Turpin goes through much mental suffering and anguish before she receives the grace, or the catalyst, needed to change her life (O’Connor 507). A very clear example of Paul’s beliefs that suffering can help anyone to feel God’s grace and feel the beginnings of a personal change for the better.

Of course, that is not to say that O’Connor’s apparent beliefs fall perfectly in line with Paul’s teachings. For example, she believes that grace is less of a gift from God to help with sin, but rather an epiphany of that that changes the recipient and helps lead them to being more charitable people in both their thoughts, and their actions (York 200). In O’Connor’s works, these epiphanies always comes as a great shock to the protagonists as their world view is challenged. This great shock is mostly administered to the protagonists, by O’Connor, when they are at a moment in their lives where their pride and their vulnerabilities collide (Eigen 337). Many times that is because some mystery of the Gospel of Christ is made known to them in such a way that the person that they pride themselves to be, is called into question as they are forced in some way to see the truth of the matter from through the mystery of grace. This conflict of
their consciousness forces the character under an immense strain that will either change them, or break them (Eigen 336). Either way, this event is not one that they can walk away from without being changed in some irrevocable fashion. This is something that O’Connor always shows the beginning of, but never the end.

One of the reasons that this always happens in O’Connor’s stories is that she is uncompromising in her stance on religion and grace (Eigen 336). Either her characters will be effected by grace to become more charitable people, or they will refuse and fail to accept God’s grace. Sometimes when they are put under the strain of a potential conversion experience, or when grace is actively trying to change them, a potential outcome of their refusal to change is outright death. Another option for O’Connor’s characters is that they will simply break and forever changed (Eigen 336). The problem is the Eigen does not actually give a definition as to what he means when he says the characters break.

What does Eigen mean when he says that one of O’Connor’s characters break? A possible answer is that he means that who they were effectively dies and they will become a completely different person. Sheppard from The Lame Shall Enter First had such a break after he found his son dead and hanging from the rafters of his attic. In fact, Sheppard “reeled back like a man on the edge of a pit” (“The Lame Shall Enter First” 482). That pit could possibly be the metaphorical pit of depression and despair, with Sheppard on the very edge. If he were to fall in, the person that might climb out of that metaphorical pit will not, in any fashion, resemble the proud man who fell in. Of course, that is dependent on if Sheppard would even be emotionally able to climb out of that metaphorical pit. Asbury could be another potential example of a character breaking under the power of grace. In the final scene, he had “the last film of illusion […] torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, […] he would
live in the face of a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped [from] him” (The Enduring Chill 382). Asbury feeling horror at the knowledge that he will have to change, but he is resistant. His last protest, because it is described as impossible, implies that something happened, though the reader is left in some doubt about what happened. So, Asbury could have been broken by his experience, but it is also possible that he was not.

The Misfit from A Good Man is Hard to Find is a character who fits Eigen’s description of feeling the strain of a conversion experience, but refuses the change that grace could bring them. In that story, the Misfit is touched by the grace that affected the Grandmother when she was forced to see herself for the kind of person she was and she decides to change in the little time she has left in the world before the Misfit kills her. The Misfit sees the change that comes over her, and for a brief moment he feels the same introspection she felt. The same desire for to be something that was better than what he was, but then he turns away from it and kills the Grandmother to deny himself that world-changing experience.

O’Connor’s views diverge further from Paul’s teachings by believing that there are many mysteries of life that can never be solved, contrary to Paul’s teachings that all things would one day be made clear. One of these divergences, is the central mystery that “Humanity, for all its horror, has been found by God to be worth dying for” (York 204). Paul, in accordance with the teachings of the other apostles, was firmly of the opinion that there was no mystery in God’s love for humanity. His teaching show that God is a loving God and wanted mankind to change for the better. Another divergence was O’Connor’s belief that while grace helps people transcend who they were, it is still a mystery that we will never understand (York 208). Yet again Paul’s teachings have point out to people that grace does help transcend the natural man, it is not a
complete mystery. We know where the grace comes from and why we are given the chance to use it, so it is not the complete mystery that O’Connor believes it is.

These difference of opinions, both with Paul and with other philosophers, have been the cause for many critics to go over her works and commented on her use of grace. There are some who agree with her beliefs on grace, there are also those who focus on her beliefs that were clearly influenced by Paul. The important part of all this attention on O’Connor’s short stories and the concepts of grace that they show to readers, is that there is attention being brought to focus on the importance of grace and how we need it.

John Roos is one of those critics who agrees with some of O’Connor’s beliefs, and he has mainly looked over her works with an eye more towards the sociological effects grace has on the protagonist in her stories. He talks about the other, likely sources besides Paul that O’Connor used as a foundation form her beliefs on grace, and how these sources likely influenced her. Roos specifically mentions two Christian philosophers Thomas Aquinas and Teilhard De Chardin. Both of these two Christian philosophers were firmly of the belief that the proper interpretation of grace was something that grace was a force that would lift up those who experienced it, helping them come together with each other as a unified group, and eventually with God (Roos 189). A concept that was very much influence to a degree by Paul. But this is not all that Roos talks about; he also points out the hints of themes that could be used to claim that O’Connor was a proponent of legalism, which is a concept which was explained in the above text, but then goes on to show that O’Connor was not actually a proponent of legalism. Specifically, he uses her character of Tanner in her story called ‘Judgement Day’ to emphasis his stance on O’Connor’s beliefs. He indicates that;
“Ironically, O’Connor uses Tanner himself to indicate the three alternatives of the final judgment….He gives three possible meanings to what distinguishes the sheep from the goats. Two are legalistic: breakers of promises and those who dishonored their parents would be distinguished from God’s sheep. The third distinction is not legalistic and not clear to Tanner, but I suggest it is clear to O’Connor: “Them that did the best they could with what they had, from them that didn’t.” Tanner, despite his failure to rise fully, may have done enough with what he had to merit a cleansing and mercy rather than damnation” (Roos 192).

Here Roos clearly shows that O’Connor was a proponent of the concept of grace that is very similar to, and clearly influenced by, what was taught by Paul. Specifically, that generally after suffering comes the grace that changes those who experience it. Something that Roos pointed out earlier in his article when he mentions the soul searching that Tanner had to go through that eventually allowed him to come an understanding of the world that was more firmly rooted in charity than his earlier worldview. Roos also masterfully points out the various views of the final judgement that many Christians of O’Connor’s time period followed and believed in, while also showing that O’Connor is of a different opinion than her peers he believed more in the legalist worldview. This is clearly an example of how the concepts of grace that were taught by Paul, have eventually trickled down into the works of authors in the modern day.

Another critic who has masterfully used O’Connor’s works to explain various concepts of grace is Carola Kaplan, who focused more on O’Connor’s characterization of the Misfit. In her article, she compares Graham Greene’s character of Pinkie Brown to the Misfit as a way to explore how the two separate authors believed in grace and how they believed that it was to be applied. These two characters were well chosen for a comparison as they are both characters who
mainly interacted with others through the medium of violence and were used to help other characters come to the shocking experience of grace that would change their understanding about the reality of evil and ultimate truth (Kaplan 116).

In fact, Kaplan describes the two, from a more religious perspective with “The Misfit is ‘a prophet gone wrong’ with a great ‘capacity for grace’ and Pinkie Brown may be a lost saint” (Kaplan 117). Kaplan further explains the reasoning behind these descriptions in that prophets have the ability to either be very good, or very bad, hence why the Misfit has a great capacity for grace. Pinkie Brown, on the other hand, could have become a person that would have inspired others to righteous acts, like a saint, but now he just tries to inspire people to make the wrong choices that will seem them condemned to an eternal damnation. That is if he inspires people at all instead of just driving them away from his presence.

Kaplan declares her belief that the two characters “may serve to demonstrate the redeemability of any man, and so implicitly hold out hope for all men” (Kaplan 188). A belief that definitely was also influence by Paul and how he taught that grace was for all those who were willing to experience it. This is a concept that Kaplan shows fairly well throughout the rest of her article as she focuses on how the Misfit had a moment of almost change. She also expresses and shows her view on which of the authors, between Graham and O’Connor, were able to express their beliefs on the subject of grace. A contest that Kaplan firmly believed O’Connor was the winner of because she was able to superiorly “manages to dramatize her views: she shows a human being change and creates an effective scene in which God’s grace intervenes in the natural world” (Kaplan 124). Or rather a scene where the ‘mystery’ of grace was able to manifest itself in such a way as to cause a change in a character, in this case the Grandmother. Kaplan further does a good job explaining her reasoning as she references the
scene where the Grandmother in ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’ is faced with death and experiences the change that God’s grace can bring and “becomes the Christian she had merely talked of being” (Kaplan 125). In response to this change, the Misfit, who saw the change in the grandmother’s countenance, feels the hints of grace trying to influence him, thus showing O’Connor’s belief that all men can be redeemed. A firm example of O’Connor’s personal beliefs on grace.

Furthermore, another conclusion that can be drawn from these critics is that everyone needs to be a better, charitable neighbor. Roos outright uses the example of Tanner to show that America still has not overcome its issues of race because many people refuse the grace needed to become charitable and true friends of those people from other ethnic groups (Roos 192). While Kaplan more focuses more on the aspect of charity about not judging others too harshly, because we do not who will be touched by the grace of God and change into a person more filled with charity (Kaplan 127). York and Eigen focused more on the shock of grace that forces people to change from their prideful selves, into someone who has more charity for their fellow man. Though, Eigen unfortunately forgot to explain what he meant when he said that the experience of grace could break a person’s character. Ultimately, these critics are pointing their audiences towards a need for greater brotherhood and charity between us and our neighbors that O’Connor constantly alludes to in her writings. A brotherhood that will be possible through the catalyzing grace of God. The grace that is still not fully understood by many people in our day and age. Therefore, there needs to be a greater effort for people to find the common ground found in Paul to help everyone come to a unified understanding of grace. The grace that leads to charitable people who worship God in word and deed.
Works Cited


