

Responding To God's Extravagant Grace

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Responding To God's Extravagant Grace Series

Ephesians 1:7

As you may have noticed driving into our parking lot today, there is some construction going on around here. Over the summer I have briefly mentioned to you from time to time the plan of this church to build a new auditorium for worship and to add children's ministry space as well as a new bookstore, some classrooms and also to radically increase our parking. Our plan is to more than double our present facility. People have begun to see that there are signs of construction around and lots of folks have asked, "Why are we building?" Why are we adding new space?

There are lots of answers, but the simplest answer for why we are building is to accommodate the growth that God has given to us here in the Vineyard over the last decade. To give you some idea of the growth of the Columbus Vineyard, 11 years ago when we changed our name from Christ Community Church to Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Columbus and I became our first senior pastor, we had about 200 people who attended our church. Today, 11 years later, we have between 3500 and 4000 people who attend every weekend – and easily another 1000 who would consider themselves part of the church. So we have nearly 4000 folks who come out every weekend.

Let me give you some perspective on the growth of our church. For some people who are not numbers people, folks who say, "I don't do numbers"; going from 200 to 4000 is really hard to comprehend. What does that mean? Other people I have met have a spiritual bias against counting. Somehow any discussion of the growth of the church or of the number of people coming here or who are being converted strikes these folks as unspiritual. I have actually heard people say that counting is unbiblical. It is not the job of a pastor or church to count people, it is simply their job to feed people. Counting is unbiblical. My response has always been, "Who says that counting is unbiblical?" There is a book of the Bible called 'Numbers' and in that book God has each of the tribes, the clans, the families numbered. If you have read through any of those OT tedious passages where not only are the tribes numbered, but what each tribe gave is numbered and highlighted, it appears that God cares about counting.

God doesn't care about numbers? In the story of the shepherd who left the 99 sheep to out and find the one lost sheep, how did the shepherd know that one of his sheep was missing? Did he just look at the sheep and say, "Hey, where's Fluffy?" Sheep tend to look a like, especially when you have a hundred of them bunched together. The shepherd knew that one of his sheep was missing because he counted them.

For Pastors who say, "I never count the people in our church," I would ask them, "Do you count the offering?" We count people because people count. You

count what is important to you. What is important to us here in the Vineyard is people.

Let me give you some perspective regarding what God has done here. There are books out and seminars taught regarding how to cause your church to grow. The books and seminars say that if you could achieve 100% growth in the course of a decade, in other words, if you could double your church size, you are doing quite well. If you could triple your church, grow 200%; you are doing really well. And if you grow 300%, quadruple your church, you ought to be writing a book on church growth because quadrupling a church over the course of a decade is very unusual.

Now, the Columbus Vineyard has not doubled or tripled or quadrupled in the course of a decade. We have grown almost 2000% - somewhere between 17-20 times over in the course of the last decade. I don't know what superlative you would use that goes beyond phenomenal growth—super-duper, extraordinary, awesome? Back in the 70's I would have said, "It's growth to the max, man."

Again, to give you some perspective of what God has been doing in this church, there are about a quarter of a million churches in America. I got this newsletter from this researcher who looks into these sorts of things. Of the quarter of a million churches in America, the Columbus Vineyard is one of the hundred fastest growing churches in the entire United States. That means that God has caused our church to grow faster than 99.99% of all other churches. We are now the second largest Protestant church in central Ohio.

I don't share these numbers with you to boast about our greatness. Do not hear an iota of that. My boasting is in what God has done with us. He has done an unusual thing. This is not the typical way that the Lord relates.

People say, "Why is it that you are building?"

The simplest answer is to accommodate all that God is doing here in the Columbus Vineyard. We have repeatedly said, throughout our history, that we will do whatever we need to do as a church to accommodate God's blessing and to reach one more person for Jesus Christ. If we need to add a service, we will add a service. Has that not been our history? We have five services now, including our Joshua House young adult service on the weekends. And if growth continues this way, or if people do not shift to our 8:00a.m. service (hint, hint), we will have to go to a 6th weekend service. It seems apparent, the handwriting is on the wall, that we need more space.

Now, in order to build, we are going to engage in a giving campaign – only the second in our history as a church in 24 years. Let me share with you what I mean by a giving campaign. You are not going to hear the word "fundraising" around here. What we are about to involve ourselves in is not a fundraising campaign. Do you know what fundraising is? Fundraising is collecting money from other people. We go around door to door selling candy bars or magazine subscriptions or we offer to wash every car in the city of Columbus – that is fundraising. You collect money from other people in return for a product or a service. And do you know what you get at the end of fundraising? Funds. The only benefit of fundraising is that you get money.

We are not going to engage in a fundraising campaign. We are not going to sell candy door to door. We are not doing car washes or bake sales. We are not interested in taking other people's money to build our church's building.

We are going to be involved in a giving campaign. In a giving campaign we challenge ourselves to give out of our own resources for biblical and spiritual reasons. We give out of our own resources for biblical and spiritual reasons. That is a giving campaign. And the result of a giving campaign is not just that money is collected, the result is that disciples are developed. We will together grow spiritually. If all that happens as a result of the next two months is that we just get a pile of cash, this will go down in heaven's book as a failure. What is eternal is what happens inside of us. Are we becoming more like Jesus in all that we do?

I want the church to learn to think biblically. To look at everything through the lenses of scripture and to be transformed, changed. I believe that the next two months is going to be one of the most exciting, one of the most productive, one of the busiest, but a thrilling kind of busy, time in our church's life.

Now, let me explain our campaign theme – the theme that we have chosen is “Responding to God's Extravagant Grace.” The reason why I picked that phrase is that I prayed about what God has done in the church and the thing that would be virtually unanimously agreed upon by anyone who has ever visited the church or has been a part of what we are doing here, what seems evident to everyone who is a part of this place is that God has really shown us favor. There is such a significant degree of favor, the hand of God is evident everywhere. And I honestly believe that a person would have to be spiritually blind to not sense the favor of the Lord on this church. Whether we are talking about the phenomenal growth of the church, or even up to the last few weeks every time I come to God in prayer, I have to say, “Lord, you have been so good to us.” Just two weeks ago we had 27 people make decisions for Christ. A few weeks back we had our largest baptism ever. And this summer, during the summer slump when the church generally goes down a bit, we had the largest group join the church ever. Then last weekend something like 35 or 40 babies were dedicated. Talk about signs of life.

The favor of the Lord is not only here, but also we have been planting a church or two a year for the last four or five years. We are committed to continue to discover new leaders and then send them out with a group to plant new churches both here in Ohio and also abroad.

You see favor every place you dip down around here. Favor in the women's ministry. We have one of the truly fine women's ministries of any place in the country. Favor in our Project Compassion, our ministry to AIDS victims, and the effect of that ministry in transforming broken lives. Favor in Joshua House, our young adult ministry; and at FOTV; and watching the expanding world missions vision. Favor in VLI, our Vineyard Leadership Institute training up a new generation of young adults to lead in the church and to plant other churches. Everywhere you dip down here in the Columbus Vineyard you see the hand of God, so that sometimes I am reduced to tears when I kneel down before the Lord and contemplate that I get to watch a church being formed that I always wanted

to be a part of and one I helped to create—a church that actually runs on all cylinders. A church that really follows a NT pattern of balance and excellence in all areas. It overwhelms me.

Let me tell a few stories.

A couple of weeks ago Rae Peyton came up and shared her testimony about all that God had done in her life both through and despite her Multiple Sclerosis. After the service a woman came up to me and said that she knew that God was speaking just to her. I said, “Tell me, what happened this morning?”

She said, “I have recently been diagnosed with MS. It has been a trying time and produced a profound struggle in faith. But listening to Rae and seeing the incredible work that God had done in her life and then hearing the message...”

I said, “God just dialed your home phone, didn’t he? He called you by name this morning.”

She said, “That’s what happened. I know that he knows that I exist and that he cares for me.”

A fellow just wrote a letter to us at the church. He was diagnosed with a serious brain tumor and scheduled to go in for chemotherapy. The short of it is that different individuals in the church prayed for him. The chemotherapy treatments have been called off. He has been checked by one of the best oncologists in the city and so far, by the grace of God, his cancer has either healed or is in remission.

A woman came up in the last month and told me that Jesus has just really intercepted her son’s life. He was into drugs and the party scene and had just gone away from their value system. She said that God intercepted him in one of the services here and he rededicated his life to Christ and moved back home.

I heard a report of a young adult who came here who was into witchcraft. A few folks prayed with that young adult and that person went through deliverance and then went home and destroyed and burned all of their witchcraft books and stuff that they had on witchcraft.

I could go on and on...

But before we look at today’s text, I want to share with you five things that you can expect, in fact I will guarantee, in the next couple of months as we move forward in this giving campaign.

First of all, this giving campaign will be conducted with absolute integrity. There is not going to be any high pressure or manipulation. No thermometers, no goalposts. We are going to be above board and speak about this the way we speak about everything and handle everything in the church. I am going to talk straight and be as honest and authentic as I possibly can be. I commit to you that all of the leaders and the ways we handle ourselves are going to be done with complete integrity. That’s the first thing I think you can expect – integrity.

The second thing you can expect is to see some miracles happen over the next two months. As people come before God, as we stretch ourselves in faith, as we risk, you can expect to see in this church some miracles happen.

Third thing that we can expect is to be hassled by Satan. Every time the Kingdom of God moves forward aggressively, every time there is a major expansion plan, you can expect that Satan is going to counter attack. This is a

principle in the scripture of attack, counter attack. You can expect that some folks are going to be hassled and we need to pray against that.

The fourth thing we can expect is that many, many of you are going to grow spiritually in the next couple of months. As you seriously come before God and you pray and participate in some of the things we have planned – our Prayer Vigil and 40 Days of Prayer and Fasting – as people connect with God, as they risk and make themselves vulnerable in giving, you can expect to grow spiritually.

The fifth thing is that overall I think our church is going to have a tone of joy and celebration where we have an opportunity to pause and reflect on all that God has done and where God is taking us. There is going to be a tone of joy and celebration with the culminating event down at the Convention Center on November 1st.

I am calling today's talk, "Responding to God's Extravagant Grace." Let's pray.

If you have a Bible, I would like you to open up to Ephesians 1. I am going to read Ephesians 1:3-8:

"Praise be to God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."

I want to pay particular attention to verse 7 and this little phrase that Paul uses when he says, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins..." and here is the phrase I would like you to underline in your Bible, "...in accordance to the riches of God's grace."

It is important that we learn the discipline as we read the scripture of pausing to meditate on a word or on a phrase. I am certainly into reading whole chunks of scripture to get a broader perspective of what the overall message of a book is, to see how an argument is constructed, or what the narrative as a whole is saying, but I believe that you are going to feel most connected to God when you pause and meditate, when you chew on and gain every drop of nurturance you can from a single word or a phrase, when you roll it around in your mind. When you put it in your mouth and suck on it like sucking candy. The discipline of meditation upon the scripture is one that is lost in our fast paced, high production culture. Where the only time we feel like we have done anything even in our devotions is if we have done a lot.

About 12 years ago, Danny Meyer, the associate pastor, and I went to England on a ministry trip. I think we had a day in London. We were bound and determined to see all of London in a day. Our approach to the great museums was to stand in a room with Renaissance Masters and just spin 360 degrees and say, "okay, Rembrandt, Rembrandt, Michaelangelo, Michaelangelo, DaVinci...let's move on to the Impressionists."

That is one approach people take with the scripture. Well, I have my three chapters done and it took me exactly 4½ minutes. I don't know why I don't feel connected to God through my scripture reading. Stand in front of one masterpiece, pause and reflect. Meditate on one phrase. That is what I want to do today with the phrase, "...in accordance to the riches of God's grace."

I will be going through various texts in the New Testament that have this phrase, "the riches" and it occurs to me that the apostle Paul cannot speak about the grace of God without using superlatives. He can't talk about grace without having to wrap it with a number of adjectives to magnify it. In other words, he speaks of the riches of God's grace in verse 7, but he goes on in verse 8 and says, "that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding." Its riches that are lavished, that God pours out extravagantly and prodigally on us.

Then look at verse 18, "I pray also that the eyes of your heart might be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you – the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints."

The riches of God's grace. The riches of God's inheritance.

Then in chapter 2:4, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy..." Rich in mercy. There it is again.

Then again about grace in 2:7, "In order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."

Everything and all of God's attributes in the NT are spoken of in abundance. There is not just a little bit of grace shown, there is great grace. There is not just a little bit of mercy, but great mercy.

Romans 2:4, "Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience without realizing that God's kindness leads you to repentance."

Or in Romans 5, "God has made his grace abound to us."

Abundant grace, overflowing grace. John writes in John 1,

"From the fullness of his grace, we have all received one blessing after another."

Let's pause and think. From the fullness of his grace, we have received one blessing after another.

Jerry Bridges in his wonderful book called "Transforming Grace" says that the idea portrayed in John 1:16 is analogous to ocean waves crashing upon a beach. One wave has hardly disappeared before another arrives. They keep coming from an inexhaustible supply. So it is with the grace of God through Christ.

That is what it has been like here at the Columbus Vineyard. One manifestation of God's favor that is hardly gone before another manifestation of the favor of God arrives. Grace upon grace.

Let me ask you a personal question. Are you in touch in any degree with this little phrase, "the riches of God's grace?" When you turn your attention toward God does the immediate thing that springs up in your heart, "O God, there has been such an overflowing fountain, such an inexhaustible supply of favor, that has come into my life." When you turn to God in prayer, do you think about God being an incredible lavish God? An extravagant God? A prodigal God? One

who doesn't come up with a thimble full of blessing, but one who comes with an ocean-size bucket of blessing?

For many people, God is like Ebenezer Scrooge, someone who demands the last ounce of work out of his people and then pays his people poorly. Let me share with you some signs that may appear in your life that suggests that you are disconnected from the riches of God's grace.

One of the signs of disconnect would be envy. You find yourself envying another person's life situation. Envy their position. Envy their looks. Envy their wealth. Envy their home. Their marriage and their kids. You are struggling because someone else is getting more praise than you, more attention than you, more recognition than you. Envy is a signal that we are not in touch with the riches of God's grace.

Let me tell you a picture that God gave to me some years ago. I have shared this before. I was struggling and really having a hard time with envy and the recognition that someone else was getting that I wasn't. I was praying about it and trying to like the person. "O God, make me like them. Make me like their praise. When they are being praised, make it instead of something that discourages me, make me excited about the fact that they were being praised." I found myself wrestling inside where you want to have a quality and you don't have it. God gave me a very quick picture of a pie. I get food images a lot. Most of them are not the Lord, but this one was. As I was praying, I had this picture of a pie in my mind's eye. It started to grow until this pie was enormous. It was filling the room and breaking through the ceiling – it was an enormous pie. And the Lord spoke very gently to me, "Rich, I can multiply grace to you. There is enough for you."

See, the problem is that we always have to wrestle over just a little bit, that if we don't grab ours now there won't be enough for us. In growing up in an impoverished family, where there is just a little bit of food on the table, and the kids have to fight over it, because the older brother or sister will get all the food first and we won't have any. So we have to fight for attention, promotion, recognition, or money. But imagine the change and transformation in your heart if you really got in touch with the riches of God's grace when he comes along and says, "there is enough for you." That no matter how much someone else takes, no matter how much someone else gets, how much limelight or attention, how great their life is, there is enough grace for you.

Do you realize that if you were in touch with the riches of God's grace, you would never feel insecure around any other human being. You would never feel threatened by someone else's extraordinary good looks, great talent, success, popularity or whatever else they bring into a room. You would never have to feel threatened again because God would say, "Friend, there is enough for you." Envy is a sign that you are not in touch with the riches of God's grace.

And so is exhaustion. The continual complaint, "I just don't have anything to give away." If you're exhausted, if you feel like an empty box this morning, if you are a Christian, but your Christianity is like coke without the fizz, so that it is flat and tasteless, you are out of touch with the riches, the extravagance of God. Sometimes our exhaustion is based on a misperception of the nature of God. I

am trying to run as hard as I can in the church pastoring, meeting all these people's needs, and when I get home I have to take care of the kids and Marlene. On top of everything else God you are coming along with your list of demands and I have to satisfy God. God becomes like Pharaoh. okay, now that you have made the bricks, you need to make more and make them without the straw. Giving, giving, giving. I get exhausted. What the Lord would say to me in those moments of self-pity and "everyone wants a piece of poor me" is, "Rich, you are out of touch with the riches of my grace. Whoever told you that you I was a taker. It is not true." Whoever told you that God was a taker? God is not coming along to you with his hand out saying, "Give, give, give." Jesus is not a thief or a robber. He didn't come into the world to take something from you. God sent Jesus into the world because he is a giver. He wants to replenish us.

John Piper, the pastor we had in a few months ago to do a conference for us, in one of his books has a wonderful picture of worship. He says, "Most people have a picture of worship that is like this. We come in on Sunday morning and we have our little leaky cups of water and we are all running up the hill to pour water into God's empty bucket. That God is requiring worship from us and we have to give him something. So we try to stir something out of our own lack and we all run up the hill to run our little bit of water into God's empty bucket. Then God says, 'You had better be back next week because my bucket is going to be empty again and I will need to be filled up.' We run around trying to satisfy God and fill God up with our church activities. That's not it at all. God is an everflowing fountain, and in worship and prayer, we come along with our empty cups and put them under the fountain and say, 'Lord, I am empty, fill me up.'"

I don't want you to begin the thought processes of this giving campaign with, "O no, another demand." At the deepest level of my heart, brothers and sisters, I want to challenge you to go before God and get in touch with the riches of his grace again.

How did Jesus keep going? Think about it. We just examined a text in Mark a few weeks ago. How did Jesus keep going with all the demands – people lined up, pressing against him, grabbing him, touching him? "Jesus, over here." "Jesus, heal my son." "Jesus heal my mother." How did he do it? Crowds of people around him and it still says in Matthew 9 that after healing everyone and praying for everyone, Jesus looked at the crowds and had compassion. He saw people were harassed and helpless. The first thing that goes is compassion when you are exhausted. You just don't care. Leave me alone, you say. If the phone rings one more time I am going to just throw it against the wall.

How did Jesus keep going? Because he was in touch with the riches of God's grace. Every morning he went before God.

Your first job, your first duty as a Christian, is to have your own soul filled up with God. Job #1, Christian, before you do anything else is to get yourself satisfied and filled up with God. Because until you are filled up with God, until Jesus is living in you in an abundant way, frankly, you are not a whole lot of good to anyone else. It is out of your present experience of God, out of your own personal relationship, it is out of your own fresh insight, out of your own meditation on a word or phrase that you have mulled over God's word in your

mind and have experienced something of his presence in your prayer that you have something to give away. It is, “okay, I have tasted a little bit of the life of God this week, now I am going to multiply that.” Your first job is not to work for God. It is to allow God to work for you. For you to be a recipient.

Now, that is a shift in the mindset of many of you. But it is all covered by the riches of his grace.

Envy is a sign that you are out of touch with God’s grace. Exhaustion is a sign that you are out of touch with God’s grace. And stinginess is a sign that you are out of touch with God’s grace.

If you see that you are a stingy person – now this is something that few of us would admit, so let me look at some of the evidences of stinginess – if the moment I begin to talk about giving you shut down, something is going on. It might be called stinginess. If week by week and you are here in the church and you have looked through your wallet for the smallest denomination bill you could give; if it is rare thing for you to give financially abundantly, not just what you can afford, but beyond what you can afford; or forgetting about money for a second – if you find yourself being stingy in compliments, that you are rarely effusive, that most of the time what people hear is criticism from you; it is very difficult for you to compliment your spouse and say a lot of really nice things about them or compliment your child, but instead your child hears mostly criticism about what they are doing wrong; if you employ people who don’t hear from you a lot of compliments, or your colleagues or your boss doesn’t hear many compliments but instead they hear: This is what you are doing wrong and here is what needs to be corrected. Perhaps it is not in finances, perhaps it is not in compliments, perhaps it is regarding your time that you are rather stingy when it comes to being inconvenienced.

We have many, many people in the church who are willing to be inconvenienced, to teach kids on Saturday night and come back on Sunday, who take the time to set up the chairs and take down the chairs, to clean up and to bring meals to people and to open their homes for groups and to host things; to have out of town guests over; to serve in some way; to drive and hassle with traffic. People who are serving certainly have their share of life’s responsibilities and kids and work. Let me ask you a personal question. Are you regularly willing to be inconvenienced or does every request have to fit into your schedule and at your leisure? Are you generous with compliments? Are you a giver?

How can we begin to survey the extent of God’s lavishness? If we were to take a measuring rod and say, “Lord, how extravagant are you?” How wide is the grace of God? If we would try to plumb the depth of God’s extravagance, how deep would our measuring line need to go? How can we draw a circumference around the riches? How can we gain perspective on this?

Let me suggest two ways to gain perspective of his infinite grace. To get a handle on the worth of a gift, one way is to inquire regarding the cost. If we want to know something about the riches of God’s grace, we might ask, “What did it cost God to be gracious to us?”

Well, let’s look at what it cost God in terms of what it cost God the Son. God the Son was eternally in the bosom of the Father, in intimate relationship with

God the Father. God the Son was co-equal with the Father, co-eternal, sharing in the glory and power of the Father in all of his fullness. Do you know what it cost the Son to give us salvation? He didn't hold onto his place with the Father. It says in Philippians 2 that he didn't consider equality with God something to be grasped, something to be held onto at all cost. He didn't say to the Father, "I am not going to leave all of this wealth behind in order to save these people who have rebelled against you. Father, I can't lay aside my glory. I can't lay aside the trappings of my deity. I am prepared to help, to do anything but don't ask me to do that."

The Son said exactly the opposite. "Father, I will give it all up. I will give up all the external manifestations of my deity." He didn't lay his godhead aside, but he did lay aside the signs, the manifestations of deity. Beyond that, he humbled himself.

You read all these stories in literature about kings who decide to put on peasant's clothes. Mark Twain's story of The Prince and the Pauper where a prince decides that he is going to wear the clothes of a pauper for a period of time and go around incognito. That is what happened when God the Son came down to dwell among us. He took on beggar's clothes and allowed himself to be born through the womb of a virgin in a stable. And then he grew up essentially in poverty. Here is God the Son, who possesses the universe, but who says in his earthly incarnation, "I have no where to lay my head." He didn't even have a home. And he constantly had to rub up against sin all the time. Constantly in his face was degradation, all the rebellion, and the pollution. And then God the Son went further and paid an additional cost. He humbled himself to death, even death on a cross, the most degrading form of death that has ever been devised. To hang naked, after being tortured and mocked and spit upon. God the Son allowed himself to be hung on a cross in agony. You hear his cry from the cross: I thirst. I thirst. The greatest suffering of all, the greatest price paid was the loss of the Father. Towering above everything else was the cry: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? For the first time in eternity, the Son who was in the bosom of the Father, the Son who enjoyed perfect communion had that relationship ripped as he became for us sin and God's judgment was poured out upon him. God the Son, who himself was sinless, allowed all the sin and filth of every person throughout history to flow his being, becoming sin and experiencing God's utter revulsion and wrath on that sin.

To understand something of the depth of God's riches, we must understand what it cost him to be gracious. It cost the Son his life. It cost the Father his Son, his precious only begotten. The one in whom he had supreme delight.

I don't know how you think about your children. I hope like me you have great delight in them. For virtually all parents there is nothing more precious than their child. And there is nothing they wouldn't do to prevent their child from suffering. There is almost no parent who would not gladly trade their own life for the life of their child. It is the most unnatural thing in the world for a child to precede their parent in death. There is something wrong about it. There is something that we internally say "no, this should not be happening."

The Son gave up his life. That is what it cost. But the Father gave up his Son. And in measuring, in trying to come up with something of a scope for the riches, what is meant by this phrase, “the riches of God’s grace,” it is helpful for us to not only examine the price paid, but also the benefits conferred on the recipient.

There is a Hebrew song that is sung at the Passover Meal, the Sedar. The song is Dyanu. Dyanu means “it would have been sufficient.” And the Hebrew song goes something like this:

God, if you would only have led us out of Egypt, dyanu – it would have been sufficient.

But you not only led us out of Egypt and out of slavery, but you led us through the wilderness. If you had only led us through the wilderness by your spirit, dyanu – it would have been sufficient.

But you also fed us with manna in the wilderness.

If you had only fed us with manna in the wilderness, that would have been sufficient, but you went ahead and led us to Mt. Sinai and gave us the law.

If you had only given us the law, dyanu – that would have been sufficient.

But you went ahead and gave us water from a rock..

And on and on and on...

And so it is that we Christians ought to turn to God and sing “dyanu.” If you had only forgiven us our sins, it would have been sufficient. If you had only just erased the marks that were against us; if you had only just dealt with our past, dyanu. It would have been sufficient.

But you know, friends, what God has given us out of the riches of his grace, for those who receive Christ, is not just a negative thing. It is not just “I will erase all the black marks in my book against you. I will blot out your past.” In addition, God has adopted us into his family as his children. There are hundreds of ways to conceive of relationship with God other than that we would be called a son or a daughter of God and our primary relationship with God would be that of Father in heaven.

God could have forgiven our sins and said, “okay, now you are one of my slaves and I am the slave master. Welcome to the chain gang.”

God could have wiped out our sins and said, “okay, I am the boss. I am the employer and you are now working for me as an employee, welcome to the company.”

God could have wiped out our sins and said, “I am the coach. You are one of the players. You need to listen to me. Welcome to the team.”

Or “I am your new neighbor. Welcome to the neighborhood.”

But in addition to forgiving us our sins, God adopts us as his children, as his sons and daughters, allowing us to call him Father, and says, “Son/Daughter, welcome to my family.”

If God had merely adopted us into his family, it would have been sufficient. But God lets us know that we are adopted into his family. Having adopted us into his family, He allows us to know that we are his children by putting within us his Holy Spirit. The Bible says the Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God.

If he had only given us his Spirit it would have been sufficient, dyanu, but he gives us access to himself. He could be a father who is too busy for his children; a father who says, “Go, run along and play. I am responsible for running the universe. I have all these important things to do. I don’t have time for your little concerns and your petty problems.” Had he only given us his Spirit, it would have been sufficient. But in addition, he gives us access to his throne at any time. Where we can come before him and obtain from his hand all that we need.

Part of your perspective concerning the riches of God can certainly be found in listening to your prayers. So many people won’t pray big prayers because they just don’t believe that God is that lavish.

John Newton, the pastor in the 18th Century, was converted from being a slave-trader to being a great Christian. John Newton, the author of Amazing Grace wrote another hymn that went this way:

Come my soul, thy suit prepare
Jesus loves to answer prayer.
He himself has bid thee pray
Therefore will not say thee nay.
Thou art coming to a King
Large petitions with thee bring.
For his grace and power are such
None can ever ask too much.

How many Christians really believe these words? How many of you really believes that Jesus loves to answer prayer? How many of you really believe that his grace is so abundant that you can never ask too much? Isn’t it the case that most of us tend to believe that God is somewhat reluctant to answer our prayers? That he is just not willing to do it and that maybe his grace and power aren’t sufficient for our needs, let alone our requests.

Had he only given us access, it would have been sufficient, dyanu. But he goes ahead and he communicates to us that he loves to answer our prayers, that we could never ask too much of him. If he had only made himself available to our prayers, that would have been sufficient. But he gives us the gifts of the Holy Spirit – healing and leadership and prophecy and deliverance and teaching and administration and giving and tongues.

If he had only given us the gifts of the Spirit, dyanu – that would have been enough. But he allows us the privilege of participating in his global plan of expansion.

Listen to me; let me finish with this. I don’t know what you hear when you hear the word “Responding to God’s Extravagant Grace.” I don’t know what you hear. Many people when they hear that they are called to respond to God have in their minds a statement that is something like this: Now that God has done so much for you, now that God has done so much for the Columbus Vineyard, it is now your time to give back to God. God has given his 90%; he has come far over the divide. It is now time for you to make up the little 10% gap that is still missing. If he did so much for you, can’t you do a little bit for him.

Friend, if you don’t hear anything else today, hear this: The call of this giving campaign to respond to God’s grace is not some duty that God is laying on you

whereby you pay him off for all the good that he has done for you or for the church. The call to respond to God's grace is itself a grace. God invites us to fill our lives with meaning and purpose and response to him is a grace to us. We get to do something that makes a difference. Every time you and I participate in some plan of God, we get to give our lives to something that matters, that makes a difference.

Friends, we don't have to spend our lives in trivial pursuits as Christians. We don't have to fill our homes with Hummels and run around town trying to get exactly the right Hummel to match the one on the other side of the room. Or say the most significant thing that happened to us that we got some little advance in a corporation or some little publication or degree following our name. We don't have to rise or fall with every 5-pound weight loss or gain. Our lives can be filled with meaning and purpose.

You and I get to be part of God's global plan. A plan that God set in motion from eternity to redeem, to buy back men and women. We get to participate in people being transformed. Here in Columbus, we get to be part of a church that is making a difference. It's a grace from God.

Marlene and I, and you who are married with your spouse, and you who are single, and you who are teens, children, grandparents, those of you who are retired – you have the opportunity to give yourself, to spend yourself on something that is bigger than you. What a grace. If God had only saved us, dyanu, it would have been sufficient but in addition, God makes us useful to the cause of Christ. God actually lets us play on his team; God actually lets us do something which will result in the expansion of his kingdom. Doing something significant is one of the primary ways that we know his grace.

We don't *got* to give. We *get* to give. It's part of the riches of God's grace.

Let's pray.