**Christmas Grace**

*by brad olson, psy.d.,m.div.*

As I stood in front of the shelves, barely tall enough to reach items on the third shelf, I looked and I pondered... I wanted something.  I scanned the shelves and eyed the miniature measuring tape. Now, I had never stolen anything before so I wasn't quite sure how to do this. But I learned quickly...  apparently we are born with the ability to steal. So while Mr. Osterhus  kindly showed Mom the new materials she ordered for Sunday School, I reach down to the bottom shelf and casually pocketed the light blue measuring tape. Oh, and since I was down there already, I pocketed the bright orange pencil sharpener too. I must have needed it.

I sat in the back seat on the way home, scared and anxious. I knew I had done something wrong. I recall shifting and fidgeting in the seat so much Mom turned around to ask me if something was wrong? I said no. I continued to hum and stare out the window while I ran my fingers around the edges of the measuring tape in my right pocket. It was a long ride home.

I couldn't hold back the truth of my dark side any longer. But I couldn't just come out and announce that I had stolen something. So I removed the tape from my pocket and started to play with it behind the front seat. I measured my shoe. I measured the seat belt buckle. I measured the back of the headrest. Mom didn't notice. Since I didn't know how to read a measuring tape yet, i started to announce the numbers of the measured item. "Two and three lines" ... that's the height of the door lock sticking up out of the top of the door. "Eight lines" ... that's the width of the door lock knob at the top.

"Brad, What do you have in your hands?" I sheepishly drooped my head and said nothing. "Where did you get it?" I mumbled, "The store."



Then, there I was... standing in front of Mr. Osterhus, apologizing for taking his measuring tape and pencil sharpener. I recall having to stretch to put the stolen items on the counter, being informed that I would now have to pay for them. And then I went home, with my measuring tape and pencil sharpener in hand. I didn't even really want them.

"We will deal with this when your father gets home", Mom announced. What? I thought we were through with it all? I paid the price of shame and my allowance for it. But, apparently I had to face Dad also. Oh crap.

Dad would be home just before dinner, and I knew I had to face the fire. I couldn't enjoy playing. I couldn't think about anything else. I was scared. I sat quietly for dinner. I remember thinking, "Maybe I'm free. Dad has not said anything. Maybe He doesn't know?" At that point, my sister... the keeper of justice and truth among the children... announced boldly, "Brad stole something from the store today and he's in big trouble."  Great. You had to say that Pam? But Dad said nothing.

As I got up from the table to return to playing with my sister, I heard Dad's voice. "Brad... We have something to talk about, don't we?"  So I sat in the big winged-back chair in the living room. Dad announced that both my brother and sister were not allowed to stay. They had to go downstairs and play. This was between Brad and Dad only.  I felt dread.. My heart was pounding. I couldn't look at Dad.  I knew I was going to get what I deserved.

Then the unbelievable happened. I got off free. Yep. Free. Dad simply looked at me and said, "Son, did you learn something today?"

That's it. That's all he said. I didn't know what to do. After a few repentant and remorseful comments, I was free to go. It felt like a 50 lb. bag was taken off my chest and I could breathe again. I ran downstairs to play with my brother and sister... almost in a fog... stunned by grace.

Can you imagine what it would be like to really understand and experience God's grace like that? Understand that our human nature is what leads us to stealing from a store? And more importantly, what if we really felt and experienced God's undeserved grace? The kind of grace that is beyond belief... grace that left us confused, knowing we got what we didn't deserve?

Isn't that what Christmas is about? Celebrating grace? God's ultimate act of grace was made clear at the cross... but the cross can't happen without Christmas. The Gift we celebrate at Christmas is grace wrapped in cloth and laying in a manger.  I want to be stunned by that kind of grace every day.

**Hebrews 2:14-18 (NIV)**

***14Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— 15and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. 16For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. 17For this reason he had to be made like them,  fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. 18Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those***