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WILLIAMS-PAISLEY

# Amish GRACE

The inspirational true story  
of forgiveness.



SERMON OUTLINES  
BY CRAIG DETWEILER, PHD



### AMISH GRACE

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#### PERSPECTIVE

In 2006, tragic murders thrust a private people into the public eye. When a gunman entered the West Nickel Mines School in Pennsylvania's Amish country, few could imagine such horror could befall such a seemingly idyllic setting. A local milkman, Charlie Roberts, took hostages and shot ten girls between the ages of six and thirteen. Five of his victims died. Such brutality made headlines.

Yet, the forgiveness offered by the Amish community to Roberts and his surviving family made even bigger news. How could victims extend such grace to a violent perpetrator? What inspired the Amish to forgive a cold-blooded murderer? *Amish Grace* takes viewers inside the devoted Christian community where grieving families debate how to respond. We see the tragedy through the eyes of two mothers—one who lost a daughter and one whose husband turned his bitterness into bloodshed. Caught between their biblical convictions and their overwhelming feelings, they struggle to find peace amidst tragedy.

*Amish Grace* is anchored by a powerful performance from Kimberly Williams-Paisley. As Ida Graber, she wonders whether forgiveness comes too quickly and easily in the wake of such a senseless shooting. As audiences, we share in her grief, tears, and pain. For pastors, churches, and viewers of all ages, *Amish Grace* offers an inspiring example of the power of love to conquer hate. It was the highest-rated original film to ever appear on the Lifetime Movie Network. These sermon outlines are designed to challenge congregations to turn their Christian commitment into tangible acts of forgiveness. The DVD for *Amish Grace* could serve as the launching pad for a four part sermon series, an extended bible study, or one inspiring evening program. We hope this film and study guide extends the remarkable legacy of these Amish families for years to come.



### Why do you keep yourself separate?

*“Come out from among them, and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing.”—2 Corinthians 6:17*

The Amish are intriguing. So much mystery surrounds their efforts to live out their Christian faith. Why are they so private? Do they really avoid wearing buttons? Why don't they drive cars? The inspiring film *Amish Grace* begins by addressing these questions. It shows an Amish community aware of how distinct and confusing their practices may be. On a Sunday morning, an elder addresses the question, “Why do you keep yourself separate?”

#### WATCH THE SCENE



A love for God, a hunger to do the right thing, drives the Amish to follow the biblical directive to “Be ye separate.” They do not want to stray. So being separate is designed to remove obstacles, to make fewer hindrances

between a member of the Amish community and the kingdom of heaven. When put in a positive light, not “how much are we giving up,” but rather “what are we pursuing,” the Amish convictions make sense. How to keep our minds on God? The removal of distractions like cars and buttons and television sets seems like a minor sacrifice compared to greater glories.

It is also intriguing to note how compelling such ‘odd convictions’ can become. While many churches and denominations invest considerable cash and energy to garner people’s attention, the Amish spend no money on outreach. Who pays for their evangelistic efforts? They do not buy television time or newspaper ad space. Instead, their distinctive lifestyles inspire those outside the community to visit, to take pictures, to marvel at their unique choices. People pay to watch them live out their faith. What a remarkable testimony!

The Amish keep themselves separate “so the path to heaven will be wide open.”

#### Questions to consider:

- What are you pursuing?
- How distinctive is your faith?
- What kind of path are you forging?





### We Come Here to Forgive Him

*“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.”--Matthew 6:14*

When gunshots rang out on October 1, 2006, an entire community ended up in shock. News crews descended upon Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. While the facts were still emerging, three Amish gentlemen headed to Charlie Roberts' house, passing through reporters eager to get the story. What did the Amish want? Were they hoping to confront the family that destroyed their peaceful existence?

As Charlie Roberts' widow tries to figure out how and why her husband shot ten innocent girls, she hears a knock at her door. Three Amish gentlemen stand outside her house, holding their hats in hand. An awkward and surprising scene follows.

#### WATCH THE SCENE



Gideon Graber is still reeling from the news that his daughter, Mary Beth, was one of the victims. Now, just

a few hours after such a devastating development, he sits in the living room of Charlie Roberts. The moment is raw, honest, and pregnant with drama. Amy Roberts extends considerable sympathy and condolences to the Graber family.

And how do the elders from the Amish community respond to Amy Roberts? They begin talking about her loss, consoling Amy on the death of her husband. It seemingly doesn't matter to the Amish leaders that Charlie killed young girls before taking his own life. A death is a death, worth noting, bereaving, and consoling one another over.

Amy Roberts is so disarmed by Amish grace. Yet, she recognizes the biblical roots of their forgiveness. Matthew 6:14 is a promise embraced by both the killers' widow and his victims. As we forgive, so we are forgiven by God. What could have been a scene of blame and rage becomes an occasion for remarkable grace to prevail. The Amish are quick to forgive the man who sinned against them. Amy (and the press) are astonished by such Christian conviction put into practice.

#### Questions to consider:

- When have you been wronged by someone?
- Was it difficult to forgive them?
- How do you respond to them?

### God has shattered my heart

*“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have  
sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over  
me?”—Psalm 13:1-2*

When grief hits, anger often follows. We wonder how bad things can happen to good people. We fire questions at God, “Why did you allow this to happen?” “Where are you?”

Gideon Graber may be quick to forgive Charlie Roberts, but his wife, Ida Graber, still has plenty of questions. Her grief and confusion is palpable. She tries to hold onto her deceased daughter, Mary Beth, through a rare photograph and an unfinished dress. Yet, Gideon challenges Ida to move on.

#### WATCH THE SCENE



Ida asks some of the oldest questions on the planet, questions that dominate the Psalms. Whenever injustices prevail, we want answers. How can a loving God allow a young girl to suffer and even die? Or as Ida puts it so poignantly, “Why would God want a beautiful, innocent girl to be slaughtered?” Jesus was born amidst a similar scene. The presence of the king of the Jews caused the reigning king, Herod, to lash out. The slaughter of the innocents drove Jesus and his parents into hiding, in Egypt. While Jesus’ birth was intended as a blessing to all, the envy and greed of a single man resulted in senseless deaths of children.

A few of the boys and girls of the West Nickel Mines School escaped unscathed. Ten less fortunate girls were left behind, turned into hostages, before they were systematically shot. Why did God allow some to be spared and others to have their young lives snuffed out? Can we consider the universe reasonable, when such inconceivable things happen?

So many theological problems arise from irreconcilable convictions. If God is sovereign and capable of healing or protecting anyone, then why wouldn’t he intervene more frequently? These questions of theodicy, of why

a good God allows bad things to happen, still haunt all of us. Surely, some things will remain unanswered this side of paradise. In the meantime, we continue to give God blame for situations he neither created, nor approved.

Can we come to the conclusions of the Psalmist? Though we may have questions, doubts, and anger, “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me.”—Psalm 13:5-6

#### Questions to consider:

- What injustices (public or personal) make you angry?
- Do you direct that anger towards God or towards those who created the problem?
- What happens when we cannot find anyone to blame? Does it work to put God on trial?



### Hate is a very big, very hungry thing

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”—Ephesians 4:31-32

It is understandable how anger can turn to bitterness and bitterness to rage. Charlie Roberts let his grief over the death of his daughter turn into a violent outburst. In the Book of Job, we see how bitterness can undermine a man who has lost his family. So how do we get to the other side of grief, resisting the temptation to turn bitter?

While Ida Graber struggles with her anger, her daughter also expresses anger at the killer and at God. When Dad hears such palpable pain, he sits down, eager to listen. His daughter pours her heart out, confessing considerable anger. She (and her mother) cannot imagine forgiving such a monster.

#### WATCH THE SCENE



Gideon speaks about hate as if it is a tangible presence, a dangerous living thing. It is described as a beast with lots of sharp teeth. But who or what does hate devour? Gideon describes how it will “eat up your whole heart and leave no room left for love.” Should his daughter feed such voracious pain? Fuel such hunger for revenge?

How interesting to consider the fruit of such hate. Does any good come from a yearning for payback? Can anything bring Mary Beth back in a satisfying manner? No amount of hate can result in the gift of life. Instead, hate yields a harvest of bitterness. Dad proposes an alternative way. Jesus died so we don't have to carry this hate around.

Just as Job came to accept the sovereignty of God amidst tragedy, so the Graber family slowly learns to live with a painful reality. They acknowledge the evil that confronted them and ripped apart their family. Yet, they also refusing to let such hate take hold and undermine their future. They can grieve for Mary Beth while learning to forgive those who clearly wronged them. Such

powerful Christian convictions serve as a model to us all.

Questions to consider:

- When have you felt hatred growing in your heart?
- Did you overcome it or do you still need to let it go?
- Ask God to let such a considerable burden off your shoulders. Jesus died so we don't have to continue carrying it.

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