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The phone rings. The caller indicates an area code from Colorado. I ignore the call. The caller left no message.

A few days later the phone rings with an area code that's familiar, so I answer it. "Hello?" I respond.

"Hello, this is Rachel at cardholder services, calling in reference to your current credit card account. There are no problems currently with your account. It is urgent that you contact us concerning your eligibility for lowering your interest rates. Your eligibility expires shortly, so please consider this your final notice."

The automated caller invited me to press 1 to speak with a live operator—a scammer who tries to get credit card number and personal information in order to charge thousands of dollars in exchange for nothing.

How many have received this kind of call?

Or maybe the call about a stranded grandchild in jail who needs money for bail.

The calls sound so real, so tempting. Who wouldn't want to lower their interest rate or help a

jailed grandchild? But behind the calls is a scammer out to make money, not help you.

It's not always easy to discern the truth of a call, and even though the apostle Paul never had to answer a phone, he too had to decide whether to answer a call. In his case, the call was from God. When answering that call, he then in turn invited others to answer the same call.

Paul, formerly called Saul, first appears in the Bible as one who hunted and killed Christians, for he believed they were a scam. While traveling along the road to Damascus, however, Paul encountered the risen Christ and received a different call from what he had been doing. While at first he may have wondered if the call was like our modern day credit card scam, he realized it was a different kind of call: a call through grace. In response, he began traveling hundreds of miles to tell others about this amazing call he received. Even after he left the areas he visited and established churches, he maintained contact by writing letters.

In a letter Paul wrote to a group of churches in Galatia, what we today know as the country of

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Turkey, he stated that he received a call through *charistos* (χάριτος), a Greek word often translated as grace or favor. It's a word that includes the notion of reaching out toward someone, freely extending oneself to another. When God offered the call of grace to Paul, God reached out to him, extended an invitation to change his life and walk in a different direction—to expand his traditional views of God and let others know that God was doing something new in the world.

It appears from Paul's letter that some in the early church resisted this notion that God could do something new, for they resisted the idea of eating with people who had different religious practices. They weren't sure if these folks were really part of God's family unless they followed their same rules. Listen to Paul's criticism of Peter in his letter to the Galatians:

When Peter came to Antioch, I had a face-to-face confrontation with him because he was clearly out of line. Here's the situation. Earlier, before certain persons had come from James, Peter regularly ate with [those outside our group]. But

when that conservative group came from Jerusalem, he cautiously pulled back and put as much distance as he could manage between himself and his [outsider] friends.<sup>1</sup>

Paul then argued that it's not what we do that makes us right with God—who we hang out with or what rules we follow—but what God has already done for us. God has *dikaioo*, a Greek word often translated as “justified.” Another way of translating the phrase is we've been “made right” with God, included in God's family, welcomed.

That's the call through grace that Paul received and expected those in the church to follow as well. The call through grace invites us to eat with those who may eat different foods, talk with those who may believe different ideas, and even worship with those who may have different ways of connecting to God.

I remember a conversation I had with my Muslim friend Kibria, who worshiped God in a way that differed from my practices and who read scriptures that differed from my own. “You Christians always talk about grace,” Kibria told me.

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“We don’t have that word in Islam. What does *grace* mean?”

I explained, “Grace is what God offers when I mess up in life. When I make mistakes, God offers forgiveness and invites me to try again. Grace is a chance to start over again.”

My friend exclaimed, “We have that idea in the Quran too! We call it love and mercy. *Grace*—what a wonderful word! What a wonderful way to understand what God does for us.”

When we would later meet with others in our interfaith network, Kibria often jokingly introduced me as his Christian friend who taught him about grace! The way we worshiped God was different, and we read different scriptures, but we discovered that we were both part of God’s family, welcomed through grace.

I think God’s family is larger than we have imagined, but sometimes we think we have to act a certain way to make sure we’re part of the family, as was the case with a girl who had been adopted by a family. When it didn’t work out, the eight-year-old

girl found herself with another adopted family. Her new dad explained:

For one reason or another, whenever our daughter’s previous family vacationed at Disney World, they took their biological children with them, but they left their adopted daughter with a family friend. Usually — at least in the child’s mind — this happened because she did something wrong that precluded her presence on the trip.

The new dad decided to take his family to Disney World, including this newly adopted daughter, but as the day became closer, the eight year old began acting out, misbehaving and getting into trouble. A few days before the trip, she said, “I know what you’re going to do. You’re not going to take me to Disney World, are you?”

Now he understood why she was acting out, so he asked:

“Is this trip something we’re doing as a family?”

She nodded, brown eyes wide and tear-rimmed.

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“Are you part of this family?”

She nodded again.

“Then you’re going with us. Sure, there may be some consequences to help you remember what’s right and what’s wrong — but you’re part of our family, and we’re not leaving you behind.”

Even during the trip, his daughter continued to act out, fearful that she would be left behind. They finally arrived at Disney World and enjoyed the first day. This is what he wrote about that night:

In our hotel room that evening, a very different child emerged. She was exhausted, pensive, and a little weepy at times, but her month-long facade of rebellion had faded. When bedtime rolled around, I prayed with her, held her, and

asked, “So how was your first day at Disney World?”

She closed her eyes and snuggled down into her stuffed unicorn. After a few moments, she opened her eyes ever so slightly. “Daddy,” she said, “I finally got to go to Disney World. But it wasn’t because I was good; it’s because I’m yours.”<sup>2</sup>

That’s what it’s like to be part of God’s family, to be called through grace. Even when we mess up, we can say to God, “It wasn’t because I was good; it’s because I’m yours.”

God’s call to be part of God’s family is not a scam. God’s love is real, for God calls you and me through grace.

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 2:11-12, *The Message*.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from *PROOF: Finding Freedom Through The Intoxicating Joy Of Irresistible Grace* by Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones <http://zondervanacademic.com/blog/the-perfect-illustration-for-gods-outrageous-grace-an-excerpt-from-proof/>.