

“GRACE OR MERIT? GRACE ALONE.”

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Scripture Texts: Ephesians 2:1-10

Prayer: Holy Father, by your Holy Spirit you caused your Word to be written down for us through your servants, the prophets and apostles. Now by your Spirit cause your Word to be written on our hearts, through me your servant, and may it bear fruit in our lives for your glory.

What is grace?

One of the things that happens when a pastor lives next door to the church is people figure it out and start to come to ask for assistance. Last week a homeless man came to our door asking for some food, which we gave him.

Was that grace? It was gracious, but it wasn't like God's grace. To understand God's grace, I would have to change the story. I would have to add that this man had come to our home last month, broken in and robbed us, and now he was standing at the door asking for food. To not call the police, but to give him food at that point would be closer to God's grace. Not only was he getting something he didn't deserve or work for, but now he is not getting what he did deserve, to be punished for his crime.

But even that wouldn't be like God's grace, because the law the man would have broken wasn't my law but the governments law. If we would have turned him in the case would be something like the State of Washington vs. Mr. Homeless man. But with God our sin is personal, it is a direct assault and affront to His holiness and righteousness and justice. We have broken His law.

There is yet one more way in which our story is not like God's grace. The homeless man came to our door asking for help. Scripture says there is none who seeks God, we are all sinners resisting God or trying to avoid God by running from God or denying God. Scripture says it is God who first seeks us, who first loves us while we were yet sinners. [Illustration idea credit to Jerry Bridges].

This is grace. And this is why so many Christians love Ephesians 2.

Ephesians 2:1-3, We are dead, defiant, doom.

What is your biggest problem in life? What causes you more trouble or grief than anything else?

The most critical, urgent, life-threatening problem you have and will ever have is your sin if Jesus is not your Savior. No heart attack or stroke or cancer or terrorist attack or fire even comes close to the danger you are in if you are not trusting in Jesus Christ for your salvation.

Paul paints a grim picture of the downward spiral of our spiritual condition, from bad to worse to terrible.

First, we are dead. We have all the abilities of a corpse, which is to say none. We have no ability to respond to God or seek God or move toward God or even to desire to. We have no capacity to believe in Him or obey Him.

Second, we are defiant, so hostile to God we are on Satan's side, "the prince of the power of the air." Our wills are in spiritual bondage, in slavery to sin. It is all we want and all we do. We indulge the flesh, we love the darkness, we do evil (see I John 3:19-20).

Third, we are doomed because we are children of wrath, under the just judgment of God. Our biggest problem is us.

With three blows Paul drives home the utter hopelessness of our situation and that we deserve nothing, we have no rights here, and God is under no obligation.

Ephesians 2:12 Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Paul is telling Christians to remember this, recall your past condition to mind, not to depress you, but to stir up your remembrance of how great God's grace is.

These three verses in just a few words paint such a dark picture of our condition that when truly understood, makes grace all the more amazing and sweet, that it saved a wretch like me.

This is a lot of bad news, but we have to start here, because good news isn't good unless we first accept the bad news.

Ephesians 2:4-9, But God is mercy, love and grace.

If verses 1-3 are true about us, then the first two words of verse 4 are more than we could have ever asked or imagined or hoped. We were dead, defiant, doom.

But God.

Look at this, look at the text.

In verse 1 we were dead in sin, but in verse 5 we are made alive.

In verse 2 we were children of the prince of the power of the air, enslaved to Satan, in hell, but in verse 5-6 we are raised up with Christ and seated with Him in heaven.

In verse 3 we were children of wrath deserving the just judgment of God and eternity in hell, but in verse 7 instead of wrath we receive the immeasurable riches of God's grace and kindness in Christ Jesus.

This is grace alone. This is the favor of God. This is the mercy and love and kindness of God. By grace alone you have been saved, Paul says twice. Unmerited, undeserved, unearned, given to those who had forfeited any right to any of it. God was under absolutely no obligation to show us any grace, that's what makes it grace, amazing and sweet.

If Martin Luther had heard the hymn Amazing Grace back in his early days as a monk he would not have thought of grace as either amazing or sweet. In those days grace was not understood as a gift but as a reward, something given to those who somehow earned it, something given to those who had prepared themselves to receive it, who were fit for it, who did their best.

Luther tried everything. He became a monk and took a vow of poverty, chastity and obedience. He prayed constantly, he wracked his brain to think of every possible tiniest sin to confess, he flogged himself and starved himself. He slept in an unheated room with only a table and a chair as his possessions.

He took a pilgrimage to Rome and climbed the steps of the St. John Lateran Basilica on his knees, reciting the Lord's Prayer on each step. Luther once wrote if ever a monk could get into heaven through effort, he would have got in. Everyone else in his monastery worried about him and told him to back off and chill out.

But with everything he did, he not only didn't feel closer to God, he felt farther away. It was never enough, or he never did it quite right. Then God opened his eyes to see grace was a gift from God, God's pure unmerited favor, and Luther said it was like he was born again, grace became amazing and sweet. It changed everything and gave him peace, joy and assurance.

Why was I, a chief among sinners, called to Christ? How could I who was so unworthy be given such a gift? How could I be set free from such a debt? Grace, pure, unadulterated grace, according to the mysterious counsel of God's will for His glory alone.

Grace saved me, grace came to me, grace gave me faith to respond, grace opened my blind eyes and deaf ears, grace softened my hard heart, grace found me. I didn't find it, it found me.

Nothing I did. All the initiative was God's and all the glory is God's. It is a gift from God. What do we have that we have not received? Nothing! So why do we boast or brag?

The God who creates everything else out of nothing, creates our salvation out of nothing, at least nothing in us, it is all in Christ.

Ephesians 2:10, Grace alone is never alone.

At the time of the Reformation one of the accusations the Catholics made of the Reformers was grace became cheap, that good works no longer mattered. It was a fair accusation if one believed grace alone meant nothing should follow from or flow from grace.

And it is an accusation that can be made just as strongly today. It led Dietrich Bonhoeffer to write *The Cost of Discipleship* which confronted the problem of cheap grace, grace that doesn't make any difference in a person's life, grace without repentance and forgiveness, grace without love and mercy, grace without seeking Christ-likeness.

This is the point of

Ephesians 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

The grace of God always has two effects, two fruits, never one without the other.

Titus 2:11-14 For the grace of God has appeared, *bringing salvation for all people*, 12 *training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions*, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to *redeem us from all lawlessness* and to *purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works*.

If God has saved you by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, then I can guarantee He has saved you to do something, good works, works that reflect your love and gratitude to God for what He has done for you, works that point to God, that bring glory and praise to God.

God has never saved anyone so they can live for themselves and just do their own thing. You are a sinner saved by grace and you are a child of God filled by His Holy Spirit to be empowered to do what He has planned for you to do. When Paul was saved, do you remember his first question?

“Lord, what will You have me to do?” The Lord answered (Acts 22:10), “Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.” God

had already prepared beforehand Paul's future ministry. Paul had to learn God's plan and walk in it. So do we.

Implications and application.

We may struggle with grace in our performance-oriented culture. American's are proud of their rugged individualism, they have pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps, given it the old college try, with a can-do attitude.

Most everything we have comes by hard work and effort. Good grades, making varsity, getting that promotion, beating out the competition, being better than others, having our kids succeed. We are surrounded by a striving and succeeding and achieving culture. We look down on the poor and homeless.

Add to that those of us who grew up in homes where we always felt like we couldn't quite earn our mom's or dad's favor or love, we never were quite good enough as that sibling or that relative. Maybe some husbands or wives are on that performance treadmill.

Whatever our experience it is really hard for many of us to accept the reality that there is absolutely nothing we can do to contribute to our salvation by grace, nothing we can add.

How many of us think our sins and failures make us unacceptable to God? So we beat ourselves up, we feel unworthy, we think we have fallen from grace. We think God will love us more if we make ourselves more lovable or more likable or more holy or more something.

I love my sons not because of their behavior, how they act, how much or little they sin. I love my sons because they are my sons, nothing they can say or do can change that. Do they sin? Of course, they do, and we deal with that, we discipline them because we love them, but their status never changes and our love doesn't.

Our behavior does not determine our status before God, Christ does. Our sins cannot kill us, they have been put on Christ, our sins cannot make us less righteous, our righteousness is from Christ.

You are not loved by God because you are attractive or good or lovable. You are attractive and good and lovable because you are already loved by God. God loves the ungodly and the ungodly become lovable. In Christ and because of Christ God looks at us and says, "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter, in whom I am well please."

How does grace change our relationships?

He who has been forgiven much, loves much. The one who really gets Ephesians 2:1-10 will be the one who loves much. Those who are amazed at how much grace has come to them, will be those who have lots of love and grace to share.

Do we demand or expect more from others than God does from us? Grace changes what we expect or demand. It changes how we see other's failures and shortcomings and sins.

If Jesus forgives our infinite debt, our million-dollar debt, who are we to withhold forgiveness for a small ten-dollar debt against us, or even a thousand-dollar debt?

I have said on many occasions that you cannot continue to have a single significant relationship without forgiveness and grace. We will sin against each other, that is a given. The key is how do we clean up our messes. We must take what we have received from God and learn how to live it and share it with others.

Grace can overcome anger and wrath and hate and disappointment and frustration. If grace can overcome God's completely justified wrath toward us, then I guarantee you grace can overcome whatever you are feeling.

Let me make the application of grace in our lives as plain as possible.

Colossians 3:12-13 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Do unto others as God has done unto you.

I can with confidence say there are some of you here this morning who need to hear this word of grace about the grace you have already received and apply it in your own situation, you need to prayerful ask God for more of His grace so you can be the one to give grace to another in the name of Jesus in a manner that glorifies God and what He has done for you.

If hell is real, and it is, and if I deserve to be there, and I do, and if I have been rescued from it by the most incredible act of grace ever committed, which I have, then my heart for others must overflow with tenderness and tears, humility and love. Love expressing itself in words and actions at every opportunity trusting the same God who changed my heart to be the one who will change others. It is an amazing grace and I appeal to you to share it freely.

Prayer: Father, I pray that you would grant to us a fuller knowledge of every good thing you have done for us in Christ and as a result we would gain greater joy and love and compassion. Do this for your glory that in the coming ages we would all rejoice in the immeasurable riches of your grace to us in Christ Jesus.