

GRACE

INTRODUCTION

This will be the third and final sermon in our short series, “The Heart of God in the Lives of Believers”. The goal of this series was to briefly look at a few character aspects of God and how they are revealed through the Gospel with the end goal of putting these character qualities into action in our lives.

Our modern day is full of world-wide hate, division, selfish attitudes, and opinions and preferences that are held as truth. If you watch movies, turn on the news, scroll through facebook, or read virtually anything on the internet, you can see how our world is turning more and more towards an “I’m right, and you can’t tell me I’m wrong” attitude. And, it divides people, fosters behavior that tears down others just to uphold a personal point of view.

To make matters worse, it’s crept into the church. Well-known Gospel-focused conferences are planning their final meeting ever. Denominations are having deep, internal struggles. Churches are splitting, closing, and losing people in droves. But Scripture calls us to be different. God calls his children to be salt and light in this kind of world.

Believers must be working to live out the heart of God in their lives. And there’s no better place to see the heart of God than in the glory and splendor of the gospel. So far, we’ve briefly looked at two prominent aspects of the gospel: compassion and mercy.

We saw that compassion is an inward feeling (or emotional response) when we recognize and consider the situation of another person. And that feeling is coupled with an appropriate, outward action in response. It’s both the feeling and the response to that feeling.

Mercy has a deep connection to compassion. While compassion is the motivational side of things, mercy can be the kind of actions that accompany and are induced by a compassionate heart. Mercy goes beyond withholding what’s deserved and actually gives when it’s not deserved. It’s not reluctantly holding back what’s deserved, it’s doing the opposite of what’s deserved with gladness.

These two themes are prominent aspects of God’s heart in the Gospel. They are deep and rich truths. However, in this last sermon in this series we’ll look at our final theme that’s also tightly connected with compassion and mercy. This sermon is going to focus on grace. Just like compassion and mercy, we could study grace for years and never fully exhaust it’s definition or the fully understand what it mean. Grace is tied to one of our core doctrinal beliefs here at Clearcreek. I remember many years ago the “Sola Gratia” (meaning “Grace Alone”) banner that used to hang on wall behind me. Grace is a core element of Biblical doctrine, and the Christian faith. And grace is unique to Christianity because of what Christ has done. Christianity stands out among other faiths because of the wonderful grace of God.

LOOKING AT GRACE

Let's turn to Ephesians 2:1-10 and see how Paul expounds on the grace of God in this letter.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. — Ephesians 2:1-10 (ESV)

Paul opens this letter, and his other letters referring to “grace”. For Paul, it’s a very important aspect of his relationship with the churches he had a relationship with. It’s core to many of the letters he’s written to churches. And, throughout the New Testament it’s used well over 100 times. And, as you can see from our passage tonight that grace is something that’s fundamental to salvation. So, it’s good that we take some time tonight and look at this last aspect of God’s heart in the Gospel.

Our author Paul opens this letter with an overflow over God’s goodness and blessing to believers. In chapter 1:3-5, he highlights the amazing work of predestination, Jesus’ death on our behalf, and the forgiveness we have now. In verse 6-7 Paul says, “*So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins.*” You can quickly see Paul’s view of God, and how God doesn’t just act gracious sometimes, but rather is overflowing with an abundance of grace. And, this grace is shining brightly through the truth of what Jesus has done for us. As you can see, Paul is highlighting grace as a major theme in the beginning of this letter, which brings us to chapter 2, where we’ll focus tonight.

OUR FORMER STATE

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. — Ephesians 2:1–3 (ESV)

Chapter 2 starts in verse 1 with, “and...” which continues the thought from the previous chapter. That chapter closes with a spiritual prayer from Paul that highlights the kingship and sovereignty of Jesus. Jesus has all authority and power. Jesus is the king of all. It’s this line of thinking that Paul connects back to when he starts chapter 2 with ‘and’. It might not seem like an important connection, but without the kingship of Jesus and the full authority that he has, the compassionate response of God shown in chapter

2 wouldn't be possible. Jesus may have had compassion, but his merciful response would have been limited. Without his power, chapter 2 wouldn't be possible.

The situation for humanity was grim. We were dead. And what hope does a dead person have? None. They're dead. Hope has run out. They are lifeless and unable to do anything for themselves. That is the state of every person who hasn't trusted Jesus for salvation and bowed their life and will to him. Like mindless zombies we were following the sinful desires of our hearts, being ruled by sin. Ruled by sin, not by Jesus. And those who are ruled by sin's kingship are what Paul calls "children of wrath".

We've touched on this already in the previous two sermons, but let's go there again. Because each time we consider it, hopefully our understanding grows. Can anyone fully understand and comprehend the depth and power and awe of the wrath of God?

Let's take a brief break to think about our solar system, and the sun that's in the midst. From our view here on earth, we take it for granted. The sun is measured to be 91 million miles from earth. That's a long distance! It's the same as going around the earth 3,700 times. Or traveling back and forth to Romania 9,000 times. The full distance is hard to grasp. Not to mention that once you get to the sun, it's massive! It's bigger than 1,000 earths smushed together. And the sheer amount of energy in heat and light coming off the sun is mind boggling. From 91 million miles away, you can still get burned by it. Even when you create a huge bon fire in your back yard...you don't feel anything like that. Now...let me blow your mind a minute. We can barely grasp the awe of God's creation of the earth and the sun. Now look up into the sky and multiply that kind of complexity by the innumerable amount of stars. Our human minds simply can't comprehend even the mere creation of God, let alone the fullness of his power.

Just as we can't fully comprehend the depth, width, and height of our universe and all that's contained within it, we cannot fully comprehend the depth, width and height of God's wrath...and all that's contained within it. God's wrath is empowered by his omnipotence, or his unlimited power. That kind of power is what humanity deserves to suffer under. That kind of power is the fate of every human who is still living under the kingship of sin. This is a terrifying and grim end...to suffer for all eternity under the hand of a pure, holy, and righteous judge for the sin we're all responsible for.

THE CHARACTER OF GOD

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. — Ephesians 2:4–9 (ESV)

However, praise the God that he doesn't leave us in that miserable state. In verse 4, Paul has penned the two most beautiful words in all of Ephesians: "But God...". God's merciful actions, driven by his compassionate heart wrap us in his immeasurable grace! It's the grace of God that saves from our sin! That grace raises us from the dead, to be alive with Jesus! His life, obedient death, and miraculous

resurrection are the evidence of his grace that redeems us forever from a deadness to king sin, to an aliveness with king Jesus. Humans were destined for God's eternal wrath and punishment, but God made an alternative destiny. A destiny in heavenly places with Jesus!

This destiny with Jesus isn't just a good thing. It's an immeasurably wonderful thing. Being seated with Jesus in heavenly places is the way that God shows the immeasurable riches of grace. Immeasurable riches? Yes, God's grace is a kind of riches. It's something that is worth great value. Value that can't be measured. This world is full of people seeking get rich quick schemes, or to get the most ROI possible, or to make the best market trades, or to ensure we have enough retirement savings, or living for that next raise or promotion, or even hunting for the best possible deal...all in the name of money and value. And yet, the world misses what they truly need...grace from our almighty, immortal, holy Yahweh shown through Jesus.

We need salvation. Salvation comes by grace from God. "...by Grace you have been saved..." Paul elaborates in verses 8-9, that it's not by our own doing, it's only by God. We do not earn our salvation, it's given as a gift because of grace. A gift isn't a gift if it's earned, so no amount of work or effort on our part saves. Salvation is entirely and completely because of God. And this leaves in the position where we cannot be prideful for our salvation, but rather we are in the humble position of receiving grace. We do not gain, create, or make our own salvation. We are merely recipients of salvation by a great and wonderful God.

OUR RESPONSE

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

This grace leaves us as the recipient of a work by God. God is the ultimate creator of all. And we, are the fruit of his work. Which brings us to a core purpose of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Paul is headed towards multiple chapters of a grace-filled, grace-changed life that lives for God's glory. His immeasurable grace hasn't only granted salvation, but has also granted us a new purpose in life. We are no longer self-driven people, we are grace-driven people. The goal of our lives isn't to please ourselves, but to please God. And, we do this by walking in the kinds of works that are good and acceptable to God.

DEFINING GRACE

Now there is much more we could say about this passage. There are many doctrines and rich truths we can explore, but the aim of this messages was to introduce us to God's grace in the Gospel. The immeasurable grace of God. To borrow from the hymn writer, a grace that is greater than our sin.

But this leads us to an important question. We see mercy, kindness and grace all mentioned throughout this text. So what exactly is grace? Are they all synonyms? Different words for the same kind of thing? What does "grace" mean?

Well, grace is another wonderful word with rich and deep meaning throughout Scripture. And, in this short message we won't be able to fully explore all of it's facets. But, if we can try to summarize it's usage in a few key points. In the Old Testament, grace is mostly related to a person having or receiving favor

from someone else, typically a more powerful person. We can see this in stories like Joseph finding favor with Potiphar and the fantastic love story of Ruth finding favor with Boaz. Someone in a greater position, who actively shows favor on someone in a lesser position. Eerdmans puts it this way, "...It may be a single act of beneficence with a response of simple gratitude. Frequently, however, it does initiate an ongoing relationship in which the recipient returns loyal service for the favor shown by the giver, and the benefactor continues to provide assistance and access to resources."¹

In the New Testament, there's a bit more nuance. It maintains the idea of a lesser person finding favor with a greater more powerful person. But it also seems to establish a patron-like relationship, where the greater becomes the ongoing sponsor of the lesser. The greater makes provision for the lesser, and in return the lesser becomes devoted to the will of the greater. And the lesser person who receives favor will express an element of gratitude or thanks for the favor they have experienced. To try and summarize in it's simplest form: Grace is when a person (usually in a more powerful position) looks favorably on someone who cannot provide for themselves and actively goes out of their way to provide for that person.

As a child I was taught that grace was getting something I don't deserve. It was the companion to the childlike understanding of mercy from last week, since mercy was not getting what we do deserve. While there is an element of truth to these definitions, grace far more than simply 'getting' something. In fact what we receive is only evidence of grace itself.

Now you might say, this sounds just like compassion! And you're right. Grace and compassion have a lot in common. If compassion is the emotional, inward feeling that someone might have towards another, then grace is the undeserved, unearned favor shown upon someone else. Grace embodies the idea of a free gift. A gift isn't a gift if it's earned. A person looks favorably on someone else and gives them a gift. A gift flows out of the generous heart of one person with the intent to bless another person. That's the basic concept of grace.

GRACE IN THE GOSPEL

We see this kind of favor, provision, and free gift in the Gospel. Really, the entirety of the gospel is a display of grace. Because we were dead...but God...gave us a free gift.

God showed favor on us to move through all of time and space to take on the human form and save us from our sins. God (the greater) worked through his father-ness to send his son-ness (Jesus) so that through the death of Jesus, humans (the lesser) could have a way to escape eternal judgement, punishment, and anguish. It was entirely the favor of God that brought this about. There was no work on our part. There was no earning, no proving, no coercing, no pay to play schemes here. God simply extended a gift to us for his glory, and for our good.

¹ Eerdmans Bible Dictionary, under "Grace"

Not only do we escape the unimaginable, eternal suffering of hell, but God also gives us good and wonderful gifts. He has provided for us blessings both now and in the future.

In this life, we continue to move and live and breathe. We have the joy and pleasure of experiencing his compassion and mercy through life itself. We see examples of God built into creation so we can catch glimpses of his glory. We have the word, the Scriptures, so we can know and understand him more fully. Believers are given the seal of the spirit, and spirit-enabled gifts to serve. As a part of the body of Christ we experience the benefits and blessing when others use their gifts. We are a blessed (favored) people!

But we're not only blessed now, we're blessed in the future to come, for all of eternity. We have a hope that brings us to heaven. Revelation 21 and 22 are just a glimpse of the future to come! I encourage you to go and read those two chapters this week, but here's a few highlights:

"...a new heaven and a new earth.....the dwelling place of God is with man...and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new...the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb...and there will be no night there...for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."

— Excerpts from Revelation 21:1–22:5 (ESV)

Wow. This is the kind of hope and home we have to look forward to! This is just a part of the immeasurable blessing we have in Christ. We have a heavenly future! Earth, this flesh, this 'now' is not the end. There is an unimaginable future beyond our comprehension. A future with Jesus forever. A future without the destructive effects of sin. A future where what we were created for is fulfilled fully. To be in the midst of his glory, for his glory...because of grace.

LIVING IT OUT

So, as people who have, and are, and will be continually the recipients of grace, how should that shape our lives? How do we live by grace? And how do we live out grace?

First, I want to ask whether you have accepted this grace? God has given you the opportunity to be saved from the judgement and destruction to come. Not only escape it, but have the opposite of it...eternal grace with God! You cannot earn it. It's grace. It's a gift. Gifts cannot be earned. Do not try and earn a gift, it's not possible. That would no longer make it grace, it makes it earnings or wages. And Romans is clear that our wages, the payment for our life is death (Romans 6:23). Additionally, don't be confused by the television network concept of gifts, if you donate you'll get a gift in return. That's not a gift, it's a loophole in tax laws. Don't think of our modern expectation of gifts for birthdays and holidays. These modern ideas of gift giving clouds our understanding of what true gifts are. Have you ever received an unexpected gift? There was no birthday, holiday, or service given...it was a 'just because' kind of expression of care and love. THAT's grace. That's what God has done through Jesus. That's the kind of God we have. That the

kind of gift offered to anyone who would receive it. Have you humbly bowed to accept this gift by putting your faith for salvation in Jesus, and Jesus alone...turning from your sinful life to live in obedience to him for his glory? Accept his gift of salvation today, as a true, unearned gift.

For those how have already done this, you may have questions about how to express grace to others. One of those questions that may be around the idea of grace (or favor) moving from a 'greater' to a 'lesser' (from someone in a position of power or authority, to someone who falls under that power or authority). Well, we are certainly not God. Nor are we divine creatures. However, there are dim, earthly reflections of God's authority and power through us in this world. As bosses, leaders, parents, and disciplers, and even just older-wiser and spiritually mature people, we have ongoing opportunities to be grace-bestowing people. Wherever we serve, do we look with favor on the people God has put into our care? Since we can look to God's gracious heart shown through the Gospel to us, we can look for opportunities to bring grace to others. Do we take those opportunities? Do we express the kind of favor that God has expressed to us? Do we love and care for those people? Does grace drive us to be compassionate and sacrifice in merciful ways?

And grace doesn't have to be limited from 'greater' to 'lesser'. What about the people who we have no authority or greater position over? Do we prefer and love them in areas of wisdom, acting like the grace-changed people we truly are? Do we use our spiritual gifts that God has graciously given? Do we identify people and situations where we can serve with our words, actions, and giftings, so others are blessed by them?

What about to the unbelievers in our lives? Do we interact with them in ways that show the immeasurable grace of God? Can they tell we have experienced grace? Do we look for ways to bless them, look out for them, care for them, and show them what grace is...so that we can share the kind of grace that we have experienced?

Lastly, do we live with a grace-bought mentality? Paul refers to himself a slave of God (Romans 1:1). Because of the grace bestowed to us by our great God, we are bound to him. Do we live with a regular gratefulness and thankfulness for what he has done? Does it increasingly drive our lives, desires and goals? When others provide grace to us, do we express gratitude and thanks? What about our leaders and those who have the authority over us? Do we respond with thankfulness for the grace they have shown us?

As we bring this series, Heart of God in the Lives of Believers, to a close I want to encourage us to regularly evaluate (by yourself and in your discipleship relationships) whether we are people shaped by grace, moved by compassion, and living out mercy.

Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible. — Ephesians 6:23–24 (ESV)