

Sufficiently Graced

Ephesians 2:1-10

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Ephesians 2: ¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ —by grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.” Friends, this is one of my all-time favorite hymns. Like many of you, I’ve heard and sung it many times. I have to tell you though that something interesting happened, as I prepared this sermon. Reading the lyrics this time, I asked the question, “What does grace sound like?” The word *grace* essentially means *favor*, but what does grace sound like?

If we could ask the apostle Paul what grace sounds like, he would most likely say something about the story of Jesus, particularly his death on the cross. For Paul, the death of Jesus was the crux of God’s amazing grace. If you want to know how much God loves the world, how much God loves you, the place to begin is at the cross. It was an amazing, unparalleled act of love. Who would die to save a world of wretched people, dead through trespasses and sins, doomed for eternal separation from God?

Paul said in his letter to the Romans, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” So, the sweetest sound to a wretch like Paul, and a wretch like me, is the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the sweet sound of salvation through faith in Him. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!

Of course, the sound isn’t all that sweet, unless you realize you are lost. Unless you realize you have been blind. Think about it. If you don’t see the gospel as relevant to you, then it will just seem like an interesting story. If we don’t understand the magnitude of sin and its power over us, then the gospel will seem like a fairy tale. The sound is only sweet, when we realize how desperately we need to hear it. “I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.”

Yet, being lost is a matter of perspective. We are never lost from the sight of God. We will not find our way to God. God will always find His way to us. He knew each of us before we were born, knows every hair on our heads, loves us as His children. God sent his one and only Son to die on a cross, so that we might have eternal life with Him. And friends, that life has already begun for us.

We often talk of eternal life as a post-mortem experience; as if it begins when you die. The truth is that eternal life begins with the process of being transformed by God's Holy Spirit, a process that takes a lifetime for many. Eternal life begins with the gift of faith. It begins when we are resurrected from being dead through sin to being "made alive together with Christ" as this letter to the Ephesians puts it. We have already begun to live eternally with Christ.

The question then becomes, "What does this eternal life with Christ look like?" Well, we learn from this passage from Ephesians that it is life with a purpose. It says, "We are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works." To borrow language from the old Westminster Confession, we are made new creations through faith in Christ for the chief end of glorifying God and enjoying Him forever, particularly by doing good works. And not only that, but they are works "which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." Now that's about as Presbyterian as it gets. We are saved by grace, not by works, and even the good works we do are part of God's plan, made possible by the Holy Spirit.

The bottom line, my friends, is that we are indeed sufficiently graced. From beginning to end, the Christian life is all about grace. We are created by grace, saved by grace, empowered to do good works by grace. Admittedly, it is difficult at times to feel the presence of God's grace in our lives. God's grace can seem far off when we are dealing with difficult situations in life.

It's easy, and human, to go from saying, "Thanks be to God," to saying, "Why me, Lord? Why me?" Yet, God looks upon us with grace whether we feel it or not, whether we believe it or not. There are some people who say, "My life is so rotten right now, I can't see where God is showing me any grace at all." There are other people who say, "How can God look upon me with grace, after all I've done? I don't deserve it?" But, the most amazing thing about God's grace is that it's not about giving us what we deserve. What's so amazing about God's grace is that we don't get what we deserve, and we get what we don't deserve. And that, my friends, is the nature of God's grace. We don't get the eternal condemnation we deserve for being sinners. Instead, we get the undeserved, amazingly gracious gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ, and the gift of God's Spirit to guide and strengthen us.

Our struggles often lead us to say, "What have I done to deserve this?" The truth is that taking a good, hard introspective look at oneself and at one's life is a good idea. Sometimes our struggles have nothing to do with the choices we've made. No one chooses to be diagnosed with leukemia. No one chooses to be hit by a drunk driver while traveling down the road. Other times it is pretty clear that our hardships are a

result of the decisions we've made. God gives us the freedom to make choices and live with the consequences.

Jesus said the two greatest commandments are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, and we are all guilty of violating both of those from time to time. The call for every Christian is to live each day in an attempt to improve on the day before, and that calls for an honest, sometimes difficult look at who we are and how we live. We have to keep asking the questions, "How am I glorifying God, and how am I loving my neighbor," understanding my neighbor to be everyone else.

Yet, the beauty of the gospel, the beauty of the grace by which we have been saved, is that it is given to us regardless of our works, good or bad. Jesus said, "In my Father's house there are many rooms." Well, our good works won't get us a bigger room or one with a better view. They're all the same. And bad works won't cause us to get our heavenly boarding pass revoked. The bible seems to speak pretty clearly about a final day of judgment, and about judgments and rewards based on the works we do. And I think many of those rewards and judgments are realized in the here and now. But we are still blessed with the grace of God, and in the end it's God's grace that prevails in our lives, a grace seen clearly in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus.

So, the motivation for responding to God's grace by trying to live up to the two greatest commandments is not fear of eternal damnation...but gratitude for the unmerited, amazingly gracious gift of eternal life. So we don't need to live our lives trying to score points with God...or judging others by how many points we think they have failed to score. We need to live our lives with gratitude. When we accomplish a good work, we should feel good about it and ourselves, and then give thanks to God for the opportunity.

We are all ministers. Some of us are ordained to specific offices of ministry in the church, but we are all ministers called to do God's work in the world. Yet, we don't need to view ourselves as God's gifts to ministry or the world. We need to view ministry as God's gift to us, as God's way of allowing us to love Him and our neighbors. We need to view each day as an opportunity to extend God's grace to others.

The other day I was relaying to my older son something a teacher asked him to do the following day. It wasn't a requirement; just something she hoped he would do. Now, he knows me pretty well by now, and he knew that once I told him what the teacher wanted, I would probably tell him to go ahead and do it. Before I could tell him to do what she asked, he said, "Dad, tell me it's up to me." I said, "Okay. It's up to you." He said, "Okay. I'll do it."

As responsible parents, we can't always give children the freedom to choose. But when we can, we should. The option to choose was a small gift of grace given out of love. He received it gratefully, and responded the way I hoped he would. It doesn't always work that way, but when it does, it's a wonderful thing. How much more likely are we to live

as God wants us to live, when we realize that God's commandments come with love and grace, and not with fear and condemnation?

Friends, we are sufficiently graced, each day of our lives, by a God who loves us enough to give us commandments to live by. We are sufficiently graced by a God who allows us to make choices, good or bad, but loves us through it all. We are sufficiently graced by a God whose grace is sufficient, whether we realize it or not. We are sufficiently graced by a God who loved the world enough to give up his only son to save it. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is a gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. How will you respond?