

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Cross of Glory Evangelical Lutheran Church

It's All about Grace

Ephesians 2:4-10

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

When we think of the season of Lent, the dominant mood we think of is one of sadness. It is a time of repentance. It is a time to contemplate sin and see its consequences in the suffering and death of our Savior. For this reason, many of the great Lenten hymns are written in the more somber minor key. But Lent is not all about sadness. And it is good for us today, as we reach the halfway point in the Lenten season, to step back from the sadness and rejoice. We rejoice because we know what the suffering and death of our Savior means. When we contemplate what Christ did for us in his life, death and resurrection, we can't help but celebrate. In our reading from Ephesians, the apostle Paul puts things into perspective. We find out just how wonderful a God we have. We see this when we realize: It's All about Grace.

Grace is the most important word of our reading and, perhaps, of the whole Bible. If we are going to appreciate the beauty of this word, we need to know what it means. The simple definition of grace is this: undeserved love. In order to really celebrate God's grace, we need to see the beauty of both of these words in its two word definition. The first word is "undeserved." In our reading, the apostle Paul highlights the undeserved nature of God's grace by reminding the Ephesian Christians of what they once were. In verse 5, we read, "*We were dead in transgressions.*" Dead in sin. That is a pretty sad condition. After the fall of mankind into sin, this is the condition which every human being inherits from his or her parents. We are all born dead in our sin. And what does the Bible say about sin? It says the wages of sin is death—not just the earthly death we will all experience, but an eternal death and suffering in hell.

If it weren't bad enough that we were born with a sinful nature and in this way deserve eternal death, we make it clear just what we deserve by acting on that sinful nature and disobeying God's commands. None of us is innocent. We have all sinned and fall short of the perfection that God demands from us. We deserve nothing good from God. As we state in our confession of sins, we deserve only his punishment and wrath. This is a helpless situation. It is especially helpless when we realize that there is nothing that any of us can do to change the situation. A dead person cannot make himself alive again. Being dead in sin, there is nothing that we can do to give ourselves spiritual life. We deserve God's wrath and punishment. And that is exactly what we would get were it not for God's grace.

God's grace means that he does something unexpected. Instead of sending his Son to condemn and punish the world, he sent his Son to save a world of sinners. In Jesus, we see the second part of our grace definition: it is undeserved *love*. When we see the way the bible describes love, we realize that love is not just a feeling. Love is action. And Jesus is certainly love in action. He came into a world of rebellious sinners and he did what needed to be done to save those sinners. What needed to be done? First of all, he needed to live a perfect life. That is what we fail to do. That is what Jesus did by shunning every temptation and following his Father's will perfectly. He also needed to suffer and die an innocent death. It sounds simple enough when you just say it or read it. But think about what that means. Jesus needed to suffer and die the most painful and humiliating kind of death for the sake of sinful people. That is certainly grace on display. Jesus then showed his love in rising from the dead and ascending to heaven, where he is now seated at God's right hand in power and glory.

And the real "grace" part about it is the way God credits Jesus' life, death and resurrection to our account. What do you think God see when he looks at you? A poor, miserable sinner? No! God is truly gracious. When he looks at you, he instead sees the perfection of Christ. How does this happen. It happens by faith. As we see in the very familiar words of our reading, "*It is by grace you have been saved, through faith.*" And this, too, is an undeserved gift. Our salvation is nothing we earn or deserve. We lay hold of God's grace by the gift of faith, which he gives us.

And this eternal salvation is something truly wonderful. It means everything to us. It means that instead of looking forward to an eternity of suffering, we look forward to an eternity of joy. Look at how the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write about the salvation we have through faith in Christ. He writes "*God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.*" There is great comfort in the words "with Christ." These words show us how we have been tied to Christ through faith in him. Now, instead of being dead in sins, we are very much alive. In fact, we are eternally alive. Paul goes on to write that God, "*Raised us up in Christ and seated us together with him in the heavenly realms.*" Even though we have not died an earthly death yet, it is though we have already been raised from the dead.

So certain is our salvation in Christ, Paul writes about it as a completed fact. God has already done this. He has already raised us up with Christ and seated us in the heavenly realms. There is such great comfort in those words. If you ever think of your life as something less than wonderful, turn to this passage in Ephesians and think about what it means that God has already seated you with Christ in the heavenly realms. Just as Christ is in the place of honor and glory, you also have a place of honor and glory in heaven. As you live on this earth, that glory is sometimes hidden. It is hidden beneath the veil of your sinfulness and weakness. It is hidden beneath the persecution you face from a world that cares nothing about Christ. But just because it is hidden, does not mean it is not a reality. God sees you as already risen from the dead and seated in heavenly glory. This is truly grace. This is a reason to celebrate.

Our lives are truly all about God's grace. With his grace, we would not have life at all. But grace can be seen in more than just the wonderful things God has done on our behalf. God's grace is also evident in the way we live our lives for him. We see this truth in the final verse of our reading: "*We are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God*

prepared in advance for us to do.” It is because of God’s grace that he created us and gave us life. It is because of God’s grace that he created new life in us through faith in Jesus. We are a result of God’s work. Just as a potter molds his clay with a specific purpose, God has made us with a purpose as well. We are created to do good works. The good that we do is a reflection of the love that God has shown us. It’s only natural. God has rescued us from an eternity in hell. Our response is thankfulness and service. Just think of it. How would you respond if someone entered a burning building just to bring you out safely? You would feel a huge debt of gratitude toward that person. You would have a desire to say thanks. But you would want to do even more. You would want to show your gratitude with kind acts toward that person. How much more with Jesus—who suffered all to rescue us from a far worse fate than a burning building.

Because of God’s grace, we want to say thanks. And God gives us many opportunities to do so. Every day when you wake up, you face a day of possibilities. You don’t know what is going to happen that day. But God does. He already had that day in mind from all of eternity. And he has prepared for you on that day opportunities to do good. You can think of your life as countless numbers of good works just waiting to happen. But they are not going to happen when you are controlled by your sinful nature and ruled by selfishness. They will only happen when God’s Spirit dwells in you and your life is rich in his grace.

Thank God for the grace he has shown! It is truly undeserved. It is truly a gift of love. May every day of our lives be a celebration of this wonderful grace. **Amen.**

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