

Grace

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 March 2024

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] Happy Daylight Savings Time. The most wonderful time of the year.

When you compare the various religions of the world, you'll find that they actually have a lot in common. Some of you have done this, studied this academically. Many religions in the world share ideas about how human beings are to live, how we are to treat one another.

You will even see concepts such as incarnation, the idea of a divine being becoming human, such as resurrection, the idea of someone coming back from death.

You can see versions of these concepts in multiple religions in the world. But there is one thing that sets Christianity apart.

There is one thing that you will find in no other religion, ancient or modern. Grace. The concept of grace.

[1 : 1 1] The notion that God's love would come to people free of charge, with no strings attached, that seems to run against every fiber of our being as human beings.

If you look at the Buddhist eightfold path or the Hindu doctrine of karma or the Jewish covenant with its requirements or the Muslim code of law, each of these offers a way for human beings to earn their way into the approval and the blessing of God.

Only Christianity dares to claim that God's love would be completely unconditional in the way it enters our lives.

And this is why the Christian gospel is uniquely able to transform human hearts and lives. And you will probably find no better description of grace and the Christian gospel than the one we have in the lectionary reading this week in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter two, verses one through 10.

So we're going to look at this as we consider this unique concept of grace and the power that it brings. And we're gonna ask three questions. Why do we need it?

[2 : 3 8] How do we get it? And then what is it all for? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the opportunity to look at the very core of our faith.

For those of us who are Christians, this is something that we need to hear again and again and again. No sooner have we heard it than we begin to forget it. For those of us here who are not Christians, not sure what we believe, Lord, perhaps this is a time where you might open our hearts to help us to see the life and the love that is on offer.

Lord, wherever we may be this morning, we pray that you would do your work in us for your glory. In Jesus' name, amen. So why do we need grace? This is where Paul begins in verse one.

He answers this question for us when he says this. He says, and you, you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.

You were dead. Now, I would guess that most people in our culture, including people who are Christians, who have grown up around Christianity, fail to grasp the full meaning of Paul's words here.

[3 : 5 2] One of my favorite movies is *The Princess Bride*. And Wesley is the main character. There's probably somebody here who has not seen it. So for your sake, Wesley is the main character.

And at one point in the movie, his friends think that Wesley is dead. And so they bring him to a man named Miracle Max. And Miracle Max takes a look at Wesley and examines him.

And he says, and they say, he's dead. What can you do? And Max replies, oh, look who knows so much. And he said, I'm not gonna do the impersonation, but it's very tempting. He says, it just so happens that your best friend here is only mostly dead.

There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. And since Wesley is just mostly dead, it turns out all he needs is a magic pill.

And once he swallows that pill, he's good to go. And he goes and he saves the princess. Most people, I believe, in our culture have a kind of Miracle Max mentality when it comes to the human condition.

[4 : 58] Right? They would read Paul and they would say, well, surely doesn't, Paul doesn't actually mean that we are all dead. That would be extreme. Surely what Paul means, and this is just rhetoric, is that we need a little help.

We just need the right medicine to get us on track. Now, different people have different ideas about what that medicine might be. Religious traditionalists, maybe some of us in this room, might say we need moral reform.

That's the medicine that society needs to get us back on track. Some of you might be more in the secular progressive camp. Secular progressives might say we need more tolerance and we need more inclusion and we need less of the religious closed-mindedness and bigotry.

That's what society needs. That's the medicine. Social media gurus. Now we've been fasting from social media, right? So this doesn't apply to any of us, but for other people, social media gurus might say we need cold plunges every morning.

We need a keto diet, right? These are things that are going to radically restart our lives and get us on the right track. People love to believe these kinds of things.

[6 : 11] People love to believe that all we need is just a little more discipline. All we need is just a better strategy. People love to believe that we are just one book or one retreat or one life hack away from becoming the best version of ourselves.

Even though all of these approaches look different on the outside, different packaging, underneath they're all the same. They all flow out of the idea that we are fully capable of solving all of our problems in our own strength.

We just need the right medicine. We love to believe that, but medicine does not work on dead people.

It works on sick people, and if you're mostly dead, but medicine does not work on dead people. And what Paul is saying here very clearly is that human beings on our own are spiritually dead.

dead. To quote Miracle Max, all dead. That no amount of human effort can fix what is wrong with us. There is no magic pill that can wake us up from our slumber.

[7 : 24] He's saying the world is full of people. Some of those people are religious, and by the way, in Paul's day, everybody was religious. There were no secular progressive people.

Everybody was religious. The world is full of people. Some religious, some secular, who seem alive. You can have people who are highly moral.

You can have people who do a lot of good in the world. People where you look at them and you think, that's a much better person than me. But what Paul is saying is that person may very well be spiritually dead.

And we say, well, how do we know that? Jonathan Edwards, who was a pastor and theologian during the first great awakening, he got to see people coming to faith in numbers that most of us can't imagine.

He saw these incredible spiritual transformations, and he wrote a lot about it. He thought a lot about it, and he wrote a lot about what is the evidence of genuine spiritual life in a person.

[8 : 30] And what he says is this, the clearest evidence of spiritual life is not that they intellectually assent to the tenets of the faith. It's not their morality.

It's not the good works that they do or the external religious practices that they partake in. Edwards says that the clearest evidence of spiritual life is love.

Do you love God? Do you delight in God? Do you delight in God's word? And does that love for God overflow into the lives of the people around you?

The point is, it's all about our motivations. You can have a highly moral, highly religiously devoted person who looks like they are spiritually alive, but what motivates them?

Edwards says there's a lot of possible motivations. It could be fear. Maybe they're afraid of divine punishment. You know, in his day, that was a thing, not so much in our day. Maybe they're moral and upright and do good because they fear rejection from their friend group or their family, and so they keep up appearances.

[9 : 48] Or maybe it's pride, he says. It feels good to do good. We live in a culture that rewards people who do good and who advertise that they do good.

If you do the right good in the way that your friend group defines good, you're going to get a lot of affirmation, and that feels good. Getting praise from other people makes us feel good about ourselves.

But what Edwards would say is this. That may produce a highly moral or highly religiously devoted life, but all of these motivations are ultimately self-serving. We're not doing good because we love God and delight in God.

We're doing good because it benefits us. And it is therefore a kind of shallow and fragile morality because as soon as it starts to not benefit us, we may stop doing so much good.

The truth is, as we see in verses two and through, whether we are moral or immoral, whether we are religious or irreligious, on our own, Paul says, we follow the prince of the power of the air.

[10 : 56] In other words, we follow the message of the deceiver who has been deceiving humans since the beginning who said and continues to say, you're better off on your own. You're better off living for yourself.

And so Paul is saying, we're driven not by love and delight in God, spiritual life and vitality. We're driven by our appetites and desires and the ways of the world around us.

And the key point here in context, religion is powerless to make a difference. Religion is powerless to help.

Religion can turn less religious people into more religious people. We're really good at doing that. Religion can turn immoral people into moral people.

Religion can also turn immoral people into immoral people. We're pretty good at doing that. But religion cannot raise the dead. It's powerless to raise the dead.

[12 : 01] And so this first point is crucial for us to understand how and why grace changes lives. The first thing that we need to recognize, Paul says, is that true spiritual formation is not possible until we recognize that on our own, we are helpless.

And if we don't see that we are spiritually helpless, if we don't recognize that, in other words, if we think that we are fully capable of solving all of our own problems in our own strength, what happens when we see someone who doesn't have their life together?

What happens when we see someone who isn't doing a good job of solving their problems? Well, if we think that we're capable of doing it on our own and we see somebody who's clearly not doing it on their own, what does that mean about them?

It's very easy to look down on such a person. You know, you see someone who's homeless on the street. You pass them every day on your walk, right? The same person is there on the corner and they ask you for something and you give them something and the next day it's the same thing and you think to yourself, you're here every morning, couldn't you show up to a job?

Right? If you can get here, can't you get to a job? Why aren't you working? You need to be working. Or you see somebody struggling with addiction and you say, you know, they just need more self-discipline. They just need more self-discipline.

[13 : 23] You see somebody who's undocumented and you say, they never should have come here to begin with. Right? And you're looking, why didn't you solve these problems?

I solved my problem, why can't you do that? Once the truth of our spiritual helplessness begins to hit home, it begins to fundamentally change how we see ourselves and how we see other people and frankly, it is profoundly humbling because you know that you're no better than anyone else. When you see people whom society tends to look down on, people who are homeless or people with addictions, you say, well maybe on the outside we look different, maybe at this point in my life our lives don't look the same on the outside but you know that deep down, spiritually, you are no better than anyone else and in fact, you may very well be much, much worse than that person, spiritually speaking.

You know that even if you're not addicted to a substance, you're spiritually addicted. Right? That even if you're not currently struggling, not having a place to live, that you on your own are spiritually homeless.

You're an outcast. You're no different. You're looking into a mirror. When we begin to recognize this truth that on our own we are spiritually dead, it changes how we see ourselves.

[14 : 55] Also, if we don't recognize this truth about ourselves, we will never really believe that we need God's grace. We will simply believe that we need what God owes us, which is a very different matter.

That's other religions. So that's why we need it. How do we get it? Paul says in verse three, we were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind. Now listen, the idea of God's wrath is frankly very disturbing for most people today.

Because I think when we hear wrath, like honestly, when I hear the word wrath, my first mental image is that God is storming around like a dad with anger issues.

I think of that as being God's wrath. He's just storming around. He's like, I can't believe they did it again. I've given all these chances and they're just, you know, that's how I imagine wrath. But that's a completely unbiblical image of wrath.

What does it mean when the Bible talks about God's wrath? Well, imagine that you live in a really, really big, nice house. You're going to have to really try hard. But imagine, pretend that you live in a really big, nice, multi-million dollar mansion and you've got original art everywhere and it's just, it's this amazing place, right?

[16 : 10] And imagine that you have to go away for a few weeks and you ask your friend to house sit for you. And your friend says, yeah, I'll house sit for you. And then while you're away, they throw a huge party. And it gets way out of control.

And there may be live animals. And things catch on fire, right? And all the art, everything gets destroyed. And it may be that at one point late in the night, a car gets driven through one of your walls or something like that, right?

So it's a crazy out of control situation. And you come home and everything is trashed. The whole house is trashed. The fire department's there, right?

It's a mess. You have a couple of options. You could, option one, demand that they pay every penny that it's going to cost to restore your house.

They have to pay it all off. You haul them in front of a judge and you request a court mandated payment plan and they have to pay everything back. But let's say it's going to cost at least a couple million dollars to restore everything.

[17 : 14] Right? Some of that stuff is priceless. What happens to your friend in that relationship? Well, they might never be able to pay it off. And so for the rest of their lives, the rest of your lives together, they're going to be paying and paying and paying but they're never going to pay it off.

So that's option A. What's option B? You could choose to forgive them. But what happens? What happens when you say I forgive you?

What are you choosing to do in that moment? Wait, you're choosing to absorb the cost of the damage that they did to your house and you're choosing to absorb the pain of their profound disrespect for you and their disregard for your things.

And you're choosing to absorb all of that. The price doesn't go away but you're the one who's going to pay it. You're the one who's going to be writing the check to pay for all of those repairs to be done.

They're not going to have any debt to pay. Not because there's not a debt but because you paid it so they wouldn't have to. You're choosing, in other words, to absorb the full cost of the wrong and you're choosing to extend friendship and love and acceptance instead of demanding that they repay you even though that would be just and right and fair.

[18 : 43] You're choosing to absorb it to set them free from that debt so that you can continue in your friendship. The point is this is that God created this world and then God entrusted this world to us and we've rejected and ignored God in the world that he made and then we have defaced and destroyed his creation as well as ourselves and there is an accumulated cost of all of the sin and the rebellion of humanity throughout the centuries there's a debt owed for all of the damage that we've done.

There's a debt owed for the disrespect and rejection of God. God's wrath is his righteous desire for that debt to be paid.

It is God looking at that debt and saying out of his righteousness somebody must pay this debt.

Things have to be made right.

Somebody's going to write the check. The problem is we owe such a vast sum that even if we had all of eternity and we were all working together we would never be able to pay it.

We would never be able to put a dent in it. That's the predicament. Hear Paul's words. 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.

[20 : 29] And then he says by grace you have been saved. On the cross he's saying Jesus absorbed the cost of all of that sin and rebellion.

He paid the price in full and the reason is because he has chosen to embrace us as sons and as daughters even though we deserve the opposite.

He said I will write the check for the damages and it will come out of my account. Right? And this is what grace means. It is God's willingness to absorb the cost of our rebellion and forgive us rather than demanding repayment.

And you say well how do we get this grace? How does it come into our lives? And Paul says in verse 8 by grace you have been saved through faith meaning anyone who comes to him in faith will be embraced.

It's a guaranteed response. Their debt will be paid in full. And there are three verbs that we see here and they all have the same prefix sin which means with or alongside.

[21 : 47] God made us alive with Christ. God raised us up with Christ. God seated us with Christ in the heavenly places.

And what we see here is that grace is not just about clearing the debt. It's an invitation to do life with Christ.

To leave behind a life of spiritual alienation and death to begin to live life with him. I love how Eugene Peterson translates Jesus' invitation in Matthew 11.

He says this, Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you will recover your life.

I will show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me. Watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.

[22 : 57] Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. The reason that we need grace is because we are spiritually helpless.

And the way to get grace is by faith. To come to Jesus in faith and simply to ask. And then the task simply becomes this. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace by beginning to do life with Jesus.

That's it. Final question though, what's this all for? What's the purpose? What is our salvation for? And here's where it begins to really come into our lives.

Every single one of us in this room, you have a God-given vocation. Right? There are all kinds of ways that God has given you resources and gifts and talents and abilities and connections and all the things that make you you and the things that when you're doing them you're in the sweet spot of what you should be doing.

This is why you're here. You have a vocation. So some of you are creators. Some of you are thinkers. Some of you are caregivers and you're nurturers. Some of you are you build or you organize, you optimize.

[24 : 14] Some of you help. Some of you heal. Some of you restore. Some of you teach or inspire or lead. We all have a vocation. And there are ways that God has specifically gifted you to be a blessing in the world, called you to participate in the healing and restoring of the world.

The brilliance of the image that we have of the new creation at the culmination of all things is that you have a garden and a city that have come together, that it is a combination of God's design and his creative power and human creativity.

We participate in building that which will last into eternity and God has given you a vocation as a way of building into that future eternal reality right here and now.

So let me ask you a question. question. When you do your work well and you are in your sweet spot, who gets the glory? I have a feeling that probably the biggest challenge for most of us in this room, and you can raise your hand if you're an exception, most people care about living good lives. You might say, not me, but most people do. We care about justice. We want to help make the world a better place. Probably some of us moved to D.C. to be a part of some job or cause to try to help make the world a better place.

[25 : 41] That's what animates you. So the challenge that I believe for us is not doing good works. It's doing good works that call attention to God's glory instead of our glory.

So this is why Paul says, this is not of your own doing. This, he means, grace coming into your life, transformation. This is not of your own doing.

He says, this is a gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. He says, if you are boasting about any of this, then you've completely missed the point.

For, he says in verse 10, we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

So what is he saying? We're not saved by good works, but we are saved for good works. That's the purpose.

[26 : 46] Some of you may know this, that the word for workmanship is *poiema*. You know, we get the word poem from that. You know, so a way of saying this is that Paul is saying, our lives are meant to be God's love poem written to the world to put his love and grace on display.

When you look at a piece of great art, you don't praise the art, you praise the artist. You say, this is amazing, what a phenomenal artist to create something this beautiful.

When you hear a great piece of music, you don't praise the instrument. I don't say, wow, what an amazing guitar. I say, what an amazing musician. What a skilled musician, right?

God's vision is that our community would be a community that puts him on display. That when people see the way we live our lives, they wouldn't praise us.

They would praise him. So we are the art, but he's the artist. We are the instruments, but he is the musician.

[27 : 53] He's the composer. The vision is that our community would be like a great symphony of grace. That each of us would see ourselves, that you would see yourself as an instrument of God's orchestra.

You're an instrument in God's orchestra, and when you play your role, when you follow Jesus faithfully, when you do your job with excellence and integrity, when you love and care for your neighbors, when you're patient and gentle with your children, right?

When you're doing all the things that you're called to do, God is playing his music through the good works that he has composed for you to do, right?

He wrote the sheet music beforehand, and he's given you the sheet music, and now you're playing it with your life. And the God-given purpose of each one of us is that the song of our life would glorify him.

And the good news of this is, living for God's glory is not only right, it's not only the reason that we're here, but it is also incredibly freeing.

[29 : 06] Because let's just be honest, some people have a lot of anxiety about whether or not they are being faithful to God's expectations of them. But most of us are far more worried about the expectations that other people place on us, or the expectations that we place on ourselves.

And most people I know who feel crushed under the weight of expectations is the expectations from other people and from ourselves that brings the most weight.

And grace not only sets us free from the demands and the requirements of the law, it sets us free from having to live for anyone's expectations. Because we know that we have the delight of God.

And that's all that matters. I love the story of the great artist Michelangelo. I never knew this until more recently. He was apparently plagued throughout his life. To try, he was sort of plagued with anxiety and stress trying to live up to his other, or to his own demands for himself and to the demands that other people placed on him.

He got notoriety and so people just demanded and expected brilliant, amazing artwork. And he found that to be crushing. And most of his life, he just lived crushed under the weight of those expectations and this incredible perfectionism.

[30 : 28] But as he approaches the end of his life, a spiritual rebirth begins to occur. And one of his final works was intended to be his gravestone. And it was a statue of himself, but in the guise of Nicodemus from John chapter 4, the one who was born again.

And it's a statue of him as Nicodemus holding the dead body of Jesus. And in a poem, Michelangelo describes coming to the end of his life and recognizing that his artwork had actually become harmful to his soul because it became, quote, my idol and my king.

Because he was living for his own glory. He was living to try to appease the expectations of others and that he had placed on himself. And what happened at the end of his life is that grace liberated him from the crushing weight of expectations.

