

Unexpected Grace

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[0 : 00] In 1996, a group called the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, it's a group that was formed out of concern about the deterioration of doctrine in the evangelical church, they called together a group of pastors and church leaders from around the world to generate a document, a document that affirmed historic evangelical theology.

And the document they produced is called the Cambridge Declaration. And it has as its framework the solas of the Reformation, the alones of the Reformation.

These five things that really sum up what the intent was on the part of the Reformers. First of all, Scripture alone. That is that Scripture would become the authority by which we would judge doctrine and practice.

And then Christ alone, it's only through Christ that we find salvation. And then grace alone, it's all generated from God's grace, nothing that we deserve. And through faith alone, that is the means by which we possess this great benefit that comes to us by grace.

And also all for God's glory alone. That is all done by God and for God, and we can boast in nothing. Well, under the headings of sola gratia, grace alone, the erosion of the gospel, the declaration makes this statement.

[1 : 18] God's grace in Christ is not merely necessary, but is the sole efficient cause of salvation. We confess that human beings are born spiritually dead and are incapable even of cooperating with regenerating grace.

We affirm that in salvation, we are rescued from God's wrath by his grace alone. It is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that brings us to Christ by releasing us from our bondage to sin and raising us from spiritual death to spiritual life.

We deny that salvation is in any sense a human work. Human methods, techniques, or strategies by themselves cannot accomplish this transformation. Faith is not produced by our unregenerated human nature.

Now, evangelical faith has historically professed that God's grace is the only source of our salvation. Apart from his unmerited favor, in which he bestows to, in, and upon us all the benefits that were gained by Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension, we are left to stand before the Holy God, naked and ashamed, as were our first parents after their rebellion against God and his law.

A human being is saved by grace and by grace alone. Now, this truth was hard to accept for many in the early days of Christ to Christ's ministry on earth.

[2 : 46] In reading the book of Acts, one gets the feeling that the reality of grace, unmerited favor, the unearned favor of God, was something that dawned on them chiefly by experience.

They learned about it as they watched God pour out his grace in their midst. And frankly, it surprised them. It was unexpected.

Unexpected in what God's grace included, and unexpected in what God's grace excluded. And I think we will see this as we listen in as Peter and prominent people in the church debate the matter. Now, in the passage that I just read from Acts, again, let me read just the opening few verses. The apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.

What are they referring to? Well, back in Acts chapter 10, we learn of this incident that Peter relates in this passage that we read from Acts chapter 11.

[3 : 54] And that was that he was in Joppa, and he was hungry, and he decided he was going to spend some time in prayer, and he has a vision. And that vision was that he saw the sheet come

down with unclean animals, animals that were not allowed to be eaten by Moses' law.

And yet, when it comes down, he's told to rise to kill and eat. And he knows that it's God speaking to him. It's the spirit of God speaking to him. And he says, No, Lord, I've never let anything unclean come into my mouth.

And God says, Don't say that anything that I have made clean to be unclean. And it happens three times, and it goes away. Well, at the same time, there's a fellow named Cornelius.

He was a centurion, that he was a rule over 100 Roman soldiers. And he, too, was a godly man. He's one of these God-fearers. He gave alms. He prayed to God. But he was a Gentile.

But he, too, received a vision. And he was told by God that he should send for Peter and bring him to his home. And he would tell him, he would bring the message of how it is that he could be saved. [4 : 56] So Cornelius had already sent men along the way. And as Peter finishes praying, he hears that there are three men who have come to see him. And he's told by the spirit, Go down and go with them, making no distinction.

That is, don't keep yourself from them. Join them. Well, he goes down and meets them. And what does he see? There's these three Gentile men. But nonetheless, he said, I am supposed to go with you. And so he goes with them.

And they go to Cornelius' house. And what does Cornelius do? This is a wonderful evangelistic tool, by the way. He invited all of his friends and all of his family to hear this message that he said God was going to bring.

And so Peter shows up in his house. And what does Peter say? Peter says, you know that I am not supposed to be in your household. He says explicitly, he says, you yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or visit anyone of another nation.

But God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I then, why did you send for me? Well, Cornelius explains why it is that he sent for him.

[6 : 01] And what does Peter do? He preaches the gospel to them. And at the end, he says, to him, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins to his name.

And then what happens? While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. All who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed.

Because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. And Peter declared, can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?

And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus. And they asked him to remain some days. Well, the news of this extraordinary event begins to spread throughout Judea.

And it made its way to Jerusalem before Peter returned. And the way Luke presents the incident, it feels like those criticizing him have been having a lot of discussions about this matter.

[7 : 07] For the immediacy with which the conflict is presented by Luke gives a sense that this was the first order of business when Peter arrived. And he had barely taken off his coat. He had barely sat down in a chair when they said, you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.

Why were they critical? Well, one commentator says, from ancient times, the rabbis, having expanded on the need for keeping the laws of Leviticus. Which was that you shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt where you live.

Nor shall you do as they do in the land of Canaan to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. They set about to prohibit Jews from social contacts with Gentiles because of the fear of assimilation and even intermarriage.

The injunction against such contacts with the Canaanite nations, Deuteronomy 7, was eventually extended to all Gentiles. Jews were even prohibited from wearing Gentile costumes and even from imitating their hairdress.

In order to prevent Jews from adopting non-Jewish habits, many laws were set forth that separated Jews from having normal social contacts with the Gentiles. Now, last Sunday evening, if you happen to be here, I spoke about the people of God needing to maintain their distinctiveness from the world.

[8 : 23] But you might recall that the reason for this was so that we would fulfill God's purpose that God has for his people. Namely, that being for the world. And to be for the world, we have to be in the world.

We have to be among our neighbors or, to use the language of Peter, the Gentiles, the people not in covenant with God. Well, this was an effort on my part to demonstrate how Christians are to be in the world but not of the world.

But indicating that there's a need to add an additional preposition for the world. God wants us to maintain our distinctiveness so that our neighbors can see what it's like to live as human beings were created to live.

In relationship with the one true living God and following his wise commands. If we think of not being in the world as having virtually nothing to do with the world, then we'll be shocked when God proves to be more gracious, more generous than we are.

And wasn't that the problem with these who criticized Peter? They insisted on maintaining the distinctiveness, but they had lost the thread of God's redemptive narrative. I'm going to read again a short passage, a short portion of the passage that we read last Sunday evening.

[9 : 36] It's from Deuteronomy chapter 4, when Moses is addressing Israel prior to their going in to the promised land. Moses says, See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you're entering to take possession of it.

Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples. Who, when they hear all of these statutes, will say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.

In the world, not of the world, yet for the world. God's people, being not of the world that they might be for the world, has been the intent of God's redemptive plan.

It is foundational to the covenant that he made with Abraham. Through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed. But those criticizing Peter for bringing the gospel of grace to the Gentiles had become so shaped by their truncated view of scripture that they couldn't see beyond the uncleanness that had occurred by a Jewish man sitting down to eat a meal with a Gentile.

But by the end of Peter's retelling of what had happened, as we read in Acts chapter 11, at least some in the company were amazed. Again, Peter says, as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as on us at the beginning.

[10 : 55] I remember the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, you'll be baptized with the Holy Spirit. If God gave the gift to them, just as we did, we received this. When we believe, who is I that I could stand in God's way?

And listen, when they heard these things, they fell silent. Silent. And they glorified God, saying, then to the Gentiles also, God has granted repentance that leads to life.

See, they seem to understand the substitutionary nature of Christ's death. They seem to grasp the need for faith and repentance. They appear to have their hope set for eternal life, placed in the death and resurrection of Christ.

What was surprising, unexpected, was that gift of grace included Gentiles. Yet they had ears to hear what Peter said when he said, who was I that I could stand in God's way?

You know, the New Testament has much evidence of unexpected, surprising reach of God's grace. You might recall some of these incidents in Jesus' ministry. You remember after Matthew, the tax collector follows, drops everything and follows Jesus, is converted.

[12 : 06] It says, then Jesus went and reclined at table in the house. Behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus at his disciples. He's having table fellowship with the very people that provoked this criticism of Peter.

And what does it say? And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to the disciples, why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? And then there's the woman called the sinful woman, likely perhaps a prostitute.

And when she, in the sense of Jesus, in her midst, what does she do? She goes in weeping, wipes off his dirty feet with her hair, anoints him with oil. But what does the Pharisee who invited him to his house say?

If this man were a prophet, he would have known who, what sort of woman this is and who is touching him. For she is a sinner. And of course, there's Paul. Paul, Saul, as he's called in Acts chapter 9, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples.

He's confronted by Jesus on the Damascus road. And when Ananias is told to go and get Paul and bring him to him, what does Ananias say?

[13:10] Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And here, he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon your name. See, God's grace was being evidenced in their midst, and it was unexpected.

We can think of Zacchaeus, that chief tax collector, that opportunist, unscrupulous man who was willing to, sure, collect taxes for Rome, but go beyond.

Take as much as he could get from people. And then on the other side, you have the righteous man of Joseph, of Arimathea, who decides to, desires to collect Jesus' body after his death and buries him in his own tomb.

And then later, even in Philippians, we hear of a greeting that Paul sends to those he's writing this letter to. He says, all the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. And of course, there's Cornelius, the centurion.

So, in all of this, right, we have tax collectors and sinners. We have a former prostitute. We have a former religious zealot who was willing to go out and kill the people of God.

[14:14] We have an unscrupulous tax collector. We have a wealthy man who's considered righteous. And we have those close to the power of Caesar's household. And not only that, but we have someone connected with military might.

No, in all of this, God's grace reaches into the homes and the hearts of people. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1, God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. That is grace.

Grace. No human being can boast in the presence of God. God doesn't look for the powerful, the influential. He looks for those whom he has elected from eternity. And later in 1 Corinthians 6, Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?

Do not be deceived, neither sexually immoral, nor idolaters, adulterers, men who practice homosexuality, thieves, greedy, drunkards, reviled swindlers, who inherit the kingdom of God, and such as were some of you.

[15:20] Amazing. God's grace is unexpected by what it includes. The reach of God's grace is wide, much wider than we expect it to be. Perhaps even wider than we think it should be.

But praise be to God, a person's salvation does not depend upon the extent of our grace. Only by the grace of God is a person saved. And who he includes in that grace can be profoundly unexpected.

And as the Deuteronomy passage reads, There was plenty of information in what God had already revealed through the law and the prophets that they should not have been caught off guard when those from other nations were being brought into the people of God.

Nevertheless, upon Peter's report, they fell silent and they glorified God. Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.

Grace is also unexpected in what it excludes.

[16:25] In our passage, it's the unexpected nature of grace in what it excludes. Acts chapter 11 says, Now the Jews who criticized Peter's actions based their objection on the authoritative teaching of the rabbis, or what's called the oral Torah, which later was combined and compiled into what's now known as the Mishnah.

And we heard a bit of that referred to in the commentary I read earlier. But grace excluded such teaching. That impenetrable dividing wall that had been erected had been taken down in Christ. But more striking is what became understood when this same issue, the place of Gentiles among the covenant community, came to a head some 10 years later when Paul and Barnabas had seen many come to Christ from among the Gentiles.

They returned to their home church from which they had been sent out as missionaries. And during that journey, they encountered much opposition from the Jews and Gentiles, but also much favor from among those two groups.

And whatever the opposition, they were convinced that God had indeed included the Gentiles among the covenant people, and they were willing to strive and to suffer for the truth. They returned home.

[17 : 48] But we learn beginning of Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas said, Wait a minute.

That's not what we've been preaching. You don't need to be circumcised to be praised. He said there was no small dissension. Debate within them. Paul and Barnabas, some of the others, were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question.

And so they make their journey. And this is a wonderful little kind of parenthetical statement. Being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia, Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belong to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.

Well, what follows is really quite a remarkable statement on the part of Peter. If we put the timing together well, we learn of Peter going, as he did, Peter going to Jerusalem and explaining what had happened when he went to Cornelius' household.

[19 : 05] And this now is some 10 years later or so, when Acts 15 is Jerusalem council. In between that is likely the event that took place when Paul had to chastise Peter because Peter had separated himself when men of the circumcision party had showed up in this Gentile territory.

That is, that Peter had come and was enjoying table fellowship with his brothers and sisters in Christ, be they Jew, be they Gentile. And suddenly, some came down from Judea and mixed among them.

What does he do? He pulls aside. And then all the other Jews that were part of that company, they pulled aside too. And Paul called them out and said, that's not the gospel. To have to be circumcised, to not be able to eat with table fellowship, with Gentiles, that's not the gospel.

In fact, it's no gospel at all. And so he rebuked them. I think that incident takes place prior to this statement that Peter makes here in Acts chapter 15.

The apostles and elders were gathered together to consider this matter. The matter being whether or not Gentiles had to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, Brothers, you know that in the early days, God made a choice among you, that by my mouth, the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

[20 : 29] And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, and giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. And he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.

Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

I think it's safe to say that for some time in the new believing community, the fact that grace excluded circumcision and following the law of Moses was totally unexpected.

This was circumcision. This was the sign that God gave to Abraham, that he was in covenant relationship with him. In fact, God went so far as to say, if someone is not circumcised, he's broken my covenant.

And if anyone was an Israelite, anyone who was a non-Israelite, wanted to participate in the Passover, he had to first be circumcised. When Joshua leads Israel, finally into the promised land, one of the first things he does is circumcise the males that were not circumcised during the 40 years of wilderness wandering.

[21 : 39] No, circumcision was important. Yet grace had excluded it. Now, it was certainly possible for those who felt it necessary or good to do, could do so.

But that it not be expected of Gentiles joining the covenant community, that was very hard to accept on the part of some. In fact, we could point out some language that appears in Acts 10, Galatians 2, and probably the same men described as belonging to the party of the Pharisees that demanded the Gentiles be circumcised, follow the law of Moses.

And it provides a warning for us. In the ESV, and a number of the translations, they helpfully translate the Greek as the circumcision party. The circumcision party.

This group appears to be a particular faction within the Pharisees that demanded the Gentile believers had to undergo circumcision to be saved. Well, there's a letter that Paul writes to a fellow named Titus.

And it's written about 60, 62 AD. So this is yet another 12 or 14 years after the Jerusalem council. And in that he says this, there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party, the same underlying Greek.

[22 : 58] So what it indicates is that the circumcision party persists in its beliefs after the decision of the Jerusalem council and the obvious outpouring of God's grace upon the Gentiles.

And it suggests several problems. An unwillingness to give up their place of privilege. I mean, these were the Pharisees of the Pharisees, to borrow language from Paul. Perhaps even we could say piety.

But it certainly is a lack of true understanding of the gospel, as Paul challenged in his letter to Galatians. A rejection of the authority that had been given to Peter and the other apostles. An ignorance of scripture and the role of God's covenant people.

No, see, for these of the circumcision party, for these men, unexpected grace was unacceptable grace. And when Peter was unwilling to stand in the way of God, these were.

But that is the wonder of grace. It is unexpected. Unexpected in what it includes and unexpected in what it excludes.

[23 : 58] So how do we remain open to God's unexpected grace? First, by remaining awed.

by remaining awed by the grace shown to include us. Knowing that we are no more deserving than any other sinful human being, which is every human being who receives undeserved favor.

Now, obviously, I don't know all of you in this room. Therefore, I don't know the life that God has saved you out of. Perhaps some of you have grown up in the church and can't really put your finger on the experience or time that caused you to place your hope in Christ.

That is such a blessing. But what you want to remember is that God still saved you out of a life that would have been condemned for eternity. That is a great mercy, a great grace.

But even if we came to faith later in life and can put our finger on the time and place, I think we can come to a place in our thinking where we don't think of ourselves as someone desperately in need of God's mercy.

[25 : 02] But in this, we are gravely mistaken. There is not one who does good, no, not one, Paul says. Listen to this language from Romans 3. None is righteous, no, not one.

No one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside. Together they become worthless. No one does good, not even one. A good passage to turn to when we're ready to favor ourselves over someone else as deserving salvation, isn't it?

So we remain awed by the grace shown to us allows us to be open to God's unexpected grace. But secondly, we need to be ready to exclude all attempts at making law the means by which someone stands in right relationship with God.

for Paul, this expectation was another gospel. In fact, no gospel at all. The inclusion of the Gentiles put the law of Moses in its place. It was righteous.

It was holy. But it served as a tutor that brought a person to Jesus because the law, the way of righteousness, was impossible to fulfill. God, in his grace, provided his son to live the way of righteousness because we could not do it.

[26 : 09] It allowed Jesus to be the Lamb of God without spot or blemish to take away the sin of the world through his propitiatory sacrifice. We confess, we Christians confess that truth.

But either implicitly or explicitly, we can make rights and rules the basis of someone standing with God, not grace. Someone, even ourselves, is either in or out depending on how he or she is doing. This is not to say that living in the manner of God's desires, in the manner that God desires is unimportant. It is profoundly important as I tried to suggest last Sunday evening.

But listen to this from Brian Chappelle. Our obedience does not determine who we are. His grace does. Out of love for God, we should desire to honor his grace and not attempt to pay for it.

Our good works show our love for him. They don't make us love him. His care precedes his commands and our attempts to meet them. But because he cares, we do. And that care will become the motivation and power of gospel living.

[27 : 17] We remain open to God's unexpected grace, knowing that we ourselves need it. We remain awed by it. And then we remember to it, it's his grace not only that saves us, but that transforms us.

And so, it's not our obedience, but it's God's grace that keeps us within the fold. Now, perhaps someone in here wonders if God would extend that grace to you.

You look at your life and you feel like you're far too sinful. You've mocked Christians, you've cursed God, you've done things that people knew that they would likely want nothing to do with you. But don't judge God's capacity for grace by the capacity of human beings, even Christians' capacity for grace.

Unfortunately, they can be of an infinite distance apart. You know, we're going to sing a song, a very famous song that closes out our worship today. It was written by a man named John Newton. And perhaps, if you take the time to learn a bit about his story, you might find, as Paul says, strength to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

[28 : 22] It's an amazing story. Slave, traitor, dissolute. But God saved him. And all of his hymns, some over close to 300 hymns are tinged with that gratitude, with that humility, with that awe, that wonder.

In his last will and testament, he wrote, I commit my soul to my gracious God and Savior who mercifully spared and preserved me when I was an apostate, a blasphemer, and an infidel and delivered me from the state of misery on the coast of Africa into which my obstinate wickedness had plunged me and who has been pleased to admit me, though most unworthy, to preach his glorious gospel.

If John Newton is any measure, then we have to agree that God's grace does not exclude sinners no matter where they come from or where they have been.

As I said, he wrote some 300 hymns and they are filled with humility and warmth and they are the result of God's amazing, unexpected grace. Pray with me and then we'll sing with John.

Gracious God, we want eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts that are tender towards your grace. We don't want to respond as these men did who first criticized Peter for having table fellowship with Gentiles.

[29 : 45] No matter if it was bound in piety, it was wrong. And then for those who demanded that they be circumcised and that they follow the law of Moses, it wasn't the gospel.

Lord, keep us open to your amazing grace. It is unexpected. We will be amazed at who it is that you will bring into your flock. And then, Lord, keep us from trying to buy your favor when we need your favor.

We can't buy it. It's no longer favor if we buy it. We need your grace. And so remind us, Lord, that it's not only your grace that brings us in, it's your grace that keeps us and grace that sustains us and grace that will bring us home as we are about to sing.

So, Lord, help us as the people of God to be people of grace in what we preach, how we live, and how we relate to those around us.

This we ask in Jesus' precious name. Amen.