

Acts 15:1-11

Romans 4:16 - 5:5

February 16, 2014

What Matters Most: Saved by Grace Through Faith

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

For almost six years now, I have been a member of a group of pastors who meet every other month at the Avila Retreat Center in western Durham. This small group is part of The Pastor as Spiritual Guide program, sponsored by The Center for Congregational Wholeness at NC Baptist Hospital.

For four of the six years, I have been the sole Presbyterian among my Baptist colleagues. To their credit, they have never once referred to me as “our *token* Presbyterian,” although they are quick to introduce me as “the Presbyterian.”

One day, as we were eating lunch in the dining room at Avila, one of my friends looked at me and asked, “Phil, how do you baptize somebody in the Presbyterian Church?” The question kind of surprised me. I figured he would have known about our method of baptism. I answered, “We baptize by sprinkling.” He said, “Oh, I know that. I mean, how do you *actually* baptize somebody? I can’t figure out the mechanics.” To which I replied, “If you’ll tell me how *you* baptize somebody, then I’ll tell you how *I* baptize somebody!” The six of us had a very interesting table conversation about the logistics and mechanics of baptism.

The two most common questions in New Member Classes are (1) What is the session? (which is another way of asking, “How do Presbyterians govern themselves?”) and (2) Why do you baptize babies? I can answer question #2 in one word – “Grace.” Okay, maybe it ought to be a two-word answer – “God’s Grace.”

Last Sunday morning, as I held John-Ward in my arms, put the water on his head, and said, “John-Ward Farrior, child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” we were all reminded of our standing before God in need of grace. People sometimes say to me, “But babies haven’t had time to do anything wrong! Why do they need to be baptized?” If you turn that question around, you get a pretty good idea of the reason Presbyterians baptize babies *and* a pretty good idea of what God’s grace is all about. “Babies haven’t had time to do anything good! That’s why infant baptism is such a good symbol of God’s grace in our lives.”

John-Ward has been loved since before he was born on October 1 of last year. John-Ward is loved just because he is John-Ward, a beloved child and grandchild. John-Ward has been loved since before he could do anything at all to earn that love.

God’s grace is summed up in the words of 1 John 3:1: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” God has loved us since before we were born. God loves us because we are his beloved

children. God has loved us since before we could do anything at all to earn God's love. And if that grace isn't amazing enough, God loves us *even when we don't deserve to be loved*. Just a few verses later in his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul writes, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life." (Romans 5:8-10)

Keep in mind the picture of a baby being baptized as we think about God's amazing grace in our lives, and what a difference it makes.

I've heard a variation of today's sermon title all my life. You see someone going through tough times, and you say, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Have you ever thought about what that really means? Does that mean God's grace is *not with* the person who is going through tough times? Doesn't that make you just a little bit uncomfortable? Doesn't that make us sound just a little bit arrogant?

Tradition says the phrase originated with a 16th century English evangelical preacher named John Bradford who became a martyr for his faith. The story is, as Bradford watched fellow prisoners marching by as they were being led to their deaths on the gallows, he said, "There but for the grace of God, go I." In 1555, Bradford was burned at the stake. He reportedly said to one of his fellow martyrs, "We shall have a merry supper with the Lord this night."¹

"There, but for the grace of God, go I . . ."

If we say that in a haughty, self-satisfied way, then we misunderstand God's free gift of grace. If we look at the trials and misfortunes of others and thank God we're not like them or place some special claim on God's grace and love *because of who we think we are or what we have done*, we miss the point of God's grace.

However, if we say, "There, but for the grace of God, go I," as an admission of our total dependence on God's grace in life *and* as an honest admission that we have *all* sinned and fall short of the glory of God, then we're on the right track to understand and welcome God's amazing grace in our lives.

There's a reason we sing about God's "amazing" grace. Here are some thoughts people have had about God's unearned grace and mercy in our lives.

- Justice is getting what you deserve. Mercy is not getting what you do deserve. Grace is getting what you don't deserve. (Cathleen Falsani)
- Grace is not a blue-eyed blonde. (Lee Woodard – from the list of elders' favorite Bible verses, hymns, and sermon topic suggestions)
- Grace isn't a little prayer you chant before receiving a meal. It's a way to live. The law tells me how crooked I am. Grace comes along and straightens me out. (Dwight L. Moody)
- Grace is given to heal the spiritually sick, not to decorate spiritual heroes. (Martin Luther)
- Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue. (Eugene O'Neill)

- I do not at all understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us. (Ann Lamott)
- For grace is given not because we have done good works, but in order that we may be able to do them. (St. Augustine)

Those last two ideas – from Ann Lamott and St. Augustine – are a good reminder that grace plays an ongoing role in our lives as Christians. We may not do anything to *earn* God’s grace, but we are called again and again to *respond* to God’s grace in how we live and what we do as disciples of Jesus Christ. “Grace meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us – Grace is given not because we have done good works, but in order that we may be able to do them – 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.”

In his great resurrection chapter (1 Corinthians 15), the apostle Paul defends himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He writes about his work preaching Jesus Christ risen from the dead, and this is what he says: “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them – though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” (1 Corinthians 15:8-10)

There were many possibilities for the first scripture lesson this morning:

- Ephesians 2:8-10: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”
- Titus 2:11, 14: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all. . . He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.”
- 2 Corinthians 12:8-9: “Three times I appealed to the Lord about [a thorn given me in the flesh], that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’”
- 1 Peter 4:10: “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.”

However, I asked Harriet to read Acts 15:1-11 – a story about the church leaders meeting in Jerusalem to discuss an important issue – because the story is very concrete, and we can relate to the question put before Peter, James, Barnabas, and the other early Christians: Is anything other than God’s amazing grace necessary for our salvation? Some of the Jewish Christian leaders wanted the Gentiles to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses before they could become full-fledged Christians and part of the church.

Peter – the apostle to the Jews, a good Jew himself -- gave a heart-felt testimonial about what he had seen, heard, and experienced among the Gentiles, who were coming to Jesus Christ by faith. His conclusion was this: How can we add any burden,

anything at all, to the Gentiles before we welcome them with open arms as brothers and sisters in Christ? Acts 15:11 may be one of the most liberating and radical and welcome verses in the whole Bible: “On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

The Renaissance mathematician and astronomer, Nicolaus Copernicus, is best remembered for his model of the universe that placed the Sun at the center of the universe, rather than our planet Earth. Needless to say, his model was quite revolutionary and challenging, particularly for church leaders, both Catholic and Protestant. Just before his death in 1543, Copernicus’ book, *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, was published, which contributed greatly to the scientific revolution.

As Copernicus lay on his deathbed, someone placed a copy of his great book in his hands. The great scientist instructed the people around him to write the following epitaph on his gravestone: “O Lord, the faith thou didst give to St. Paul, I cannot ask; the mercy thou didst show to St. Peter, I dare not ask; but, Lord, the grace thou didst show unto the dying robber, that, Lord, show to me.”²

Here at the end of the sermon, let’s go back and rethink that phrase, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” I’m not a country music fan, but I came across a song by Keith Urban called “But for the Grace of God.” He sings about how grateful he is for his true love, especially when he sees the troubles other people are having, who are lonely or fighting: “But for the grace of God go I, I must’ve been born a lucky guy, Heaven only knows how I’ve been blessed with the gift of your love. . .”

In light of everything we’ve heard from the Scriptures this morning about God’s amazing grace, the song’s chorus is a pretty good description of how we get what we don’t deserve, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

I look around and all I see
Is your happiness embracing me
Oh Lord I'd be lost
But for the grace of God
Oh Lord I'd be lost

Oh Lord I'd be lost
But for the grace of God
Oh Lord I'd be lost
But for the grace of God

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound – I once was lost, but now am found.

As the people of God, let us always say, “But by the grace of God we are what we are – children of God, created in Christ Jesus for good works.”

As the people of God, let us always hope and pray that God’s grace toward us will not be in vain.

NOTES

¹www.phrases.org.uk

² “Precious Grace,” at www.tentmaker.org/Quotes/grace_quotes

Let us pray: (a Celtic prayer from the 1st millennium)

Lord, You are the peace of all things calm
You are the place to hide from harm
You are the light that shines in dark
You are the heart's eternal spark
You are the door that's open wide
You are the guest who waits inside
You are the stranger at the door
You are the calling of the poor
You are my Lord and with me still
You are my love, keep me from ill
You are the light, the truth, the way
You are my Savior this very day. Amen.