

Grace, Grace, God's Grace

St. Mark Lutheran
Reformation Day

Pastor Ken Welsh
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For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...

Romans 3:23-24

Let's start with several questions. How do the people you hang around with view Christianity? How do people in general view Christianity? How does the media view Christianity?

Do they see Christians as ambassadors of God bearing his grace and being generous with his love? Or do they see Christianity as a way to earn a place in heaven through keeping a lot of rules? And if you don't keep these rules, you are going to be downgraded, punished, or even excluded from God and his community. The main message many people hear from Christianity is that we are always against something or someone. Therefore they may see our God as always being against something or someone.

I would say that while mankind does have its faults, and while God does at times become very distressed with our disobedience, that neither of these is the main message of the Holy Scriptures. We read the main message this very morning from our Gospel lesson, John 3:16-17: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." And that is where the emphasis of the church and our own personal emphasis should be.

Romans 3:23-24 goes on to explain more about God's plan of salvation. It says, "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his *grace* as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..." God clearly says here and in other places of the Holy Scriptures that salvation is a free gift, and if it is a gift, then it cannot be earned or worked for.

This, however, runs contrary to what other religions teach. That's why we have so many other religions. They are man-made religions, and they teach that humans will get to heaven or reach a better place or state based on works that they do. The key word in these religions is "do". You receive God's approval by what you do. A religion such as Islam teaches that your good deeds must outweigh the bad for you to go to heaven. Then there is also the idea going around that all religions are basically the same. You are going to be all right as long as you have something. But that is false, because they all tell you to "do" different things. And salvation in Christianity is not based on what we do, but on what Jesus has "done" for us.

Tragically, this idea that what we "do" is what helps bring about forgiveness of sins and eternal life even made its way into the church a long time ago. About five hundred years ago, a man named Martin Luther grew up in that religious system.

He became a monk. He read and studied the Bible, not just a little bit, but a lot. He regularly confessed his sins, even the most trivial sins. We are told that sometimes he confessed for hours. His entire life was spent trying to appease an angry God. On one occasion his confessor, Father Staupitz, became tired of all of the sins Luther was confessing and told him to go and do something worth confessing.

But no matter how much he tried, no matter how much he did, his striving to have a good relationship with God failed him. He asked himself, "Have I done enough?" and "Am I good enough?", questions that have plagued many people down through the ages. Anyone looking at Luther's life would have said he was very religious, but that did not bring him peace with God.

But in his studies he went back to the Book of Romans and studied it closely, and what he discovered changed his life forever and altered the course of Christianity. He noted that Romans 1 said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'" (NIV) This was followed by what we already read Romans 3 said about us being "justified by his grace as a gift", and that was followed in Romans 5 which said, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The Apostle Paul summed up all of these words from Romans beautifully when he wrote in Ephesians 2: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

So, what exactly is grace? It is often defined as the "undeserved mercy of God". That's a good definition as long as we realize that the meaning of each word is a little different. "Mercy" is when God doesn't give us what we deserve, and that is eternal punishment for our sins. "Grace", on the other hand, is when God gives us what we don't deserve, the blessings of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal heaven, because Jesus Christ paid for our sins on the cross.

Luther's studies led him to note other teachings in the church that were not based on the Holy Scriptures. He challenged the church to change its ways and return to teachings based solely on the Holy Scriptures. He publicly posted his 95 theses on a church door. He was ordered to appear at what was called the Diet of Worms in 1521 to defend his teachings. He went despite the fact that he was being labelled a heretic, threatened with excommunication, and had a good chance of being killed. He was given the opportunity to avoid all this if he would recant his teachings about the grace of God and the errors in church teaching.

He refused. Here are some of the things that he said in his defense. He would not change his teachings unless they could be shown wrong by the Holy Scriptures. He did not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they contradicted each other. Luther said that his conscience was captive to the Word of God. He ended by saying: "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me."

Luther barely escaped with his life. But he and his followers sparked a reformation which led to the formation of the Lutheran Church and a number of other Protestant churches that were formed after ours. The reformation happened not because Luther was against the church. It happened because he took a stand that Christian teaching should be based only on the Scriptures, and that our that our graceful, merciful God has given us salvation as a gift through faith in the death of Jesus on the cross for our sins. Even though we are flawed, God has made it possible for us to have a relationship with him through Jesus Christ. Those are the most important things we need to remember as we observe Reformation Day today.

God's grace means that we can be members of his family. God's grace means that we don't have to worry about whether we have done enough good things to be saved; Jesus did it all on the cross. God's grace means that he considers us to be his children, and he will heal us and take care of us. And God doesn't play favorites. No matter what a person's background, status, or sins may be, you receive God's grace when you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior.

Does anybody wonder how I came up with the title of today's message, "Grace, Grace, God's Grace"? It is the first line of a refrain in a hymn penned by Julia Johnston. It goes like this:

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord; Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt;
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured; There where the blood of the lamb was spilt.
Chorus: Grace, grace, God's grace, Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God's grace, Grace that is greater than all our sin.
Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace, Freely bestowed on all who believe;
You who are longing to see his face, will you this moment His grace receive?
(Repeat chorus)

How marvelous it is that today, on the very day when we remember and celebrate the birthday of our church, that we also get to respond to God's grace and love for us by showing we care about Him and kingdom work. This is our Commitment Sunday. May you be blessed as your actions and deeds, today and every day, echo the words once spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "Here am I. Send me!" Amen.