“It’s All Grace”
Grace Orientation to Life
The unmerited gift from God for our salvation that, as Christians,
we are commissioned to share with all people unconditionally.
Ephesians 2:8-10, Romans 5:1-11
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Ephesians 2:8-10

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.

Introduction

This week I heard a representative from an educational organization say she believed public schools should be providing children with a "value-neutral" education. They should be about education, not indoctrination, she said.

It has been said that you never graduate from the school of Christian education, that we are to be lifelong learners. But our Christian education is not value-neutral, because our goal is not education for education's sake. This is why I like the term spiritual formation. We are unabashed that our goal is nothing less than the transformation of the whole person.

Last fall SPC adopted five values for our church. When talked about in this way, values answer the "why we do what we do" question. They describe the house rules, the way we've chosen to live together, treat each other, and fulfill our mission to Share Christ, Serve Others and Grow Together in Faith. The five values we adopted are Grace Orientation to Life, Bible-centered teaching/preaching, Fellowship Community, Godly Servant Leadership and Theological Diversity. For the next five weeks, I will be preaching about one value each week.

This Sunday we begin with a Grace Orientation to Life. It is the perfect value with which to begin, because it is the starting place for all individual disciples. We are here because of God's grace. Grace is what establishes our relationship with God, and grace is what maintains us. As such, it also should be exhibited in our relationships with each other.

Our second passage is Romans 5:1-11. Paul can be challenging to read, because his arguments are tightly woven, building throughout the letter, and use many theological terms we have to unpack. All of that is true for our passage today. But this is one of the most important sections of Romans. Paul concludes his case that we are justified through faith, a past, completed action that makes a difference in our day-to-day life.

Romans 5:1-11

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus
Christ, [2] through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast
in our hope of sharing the glory of God. [3] And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions,
knowing that affliction produces endurance, [4] and endurance produces character, and character
produces hope, [5] and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into
our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

[6] *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.* ***[7]*** *Indeed, rarely will*
anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually
dare to die. ***[8]*** *But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for*
us. ***[9]*** *Much more surely, therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be*
saved through him from the wrath of God. ***[10]*** *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. **11** But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

The Amazing Concept of Grace

There's an old illustration you might have heard. A man dies and faces the angel Gabriel at heaven's gates. The angel said, "Here's how this works. You need a hundred points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you have done, and I will give a certain number of points for each of them. The more good there is in the work that you cite, the more points you will get for it. When you get to a hundred points, you get in."

"Okay," the man said, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

Gabriel replied, "That's wonderful. That's worth three points."

"Three points?" said the man incredulously. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my money and service."

"Terrific!" said Gabriel, "that's certainly worth a point."

"One point?" said the man with his eyes beginning to show a bit of panic. "Well, how about this: I opened a shelter for the homeless in my city and fed needy people by the hundreds during holidays."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," said the angel.

"TWO POINTS!" cried the man in desperation. "At this rate the only way I will get to heaven is by the grace of God."

"Exactly!" said Gabriel. "Come on in."[1]

Grace and Peace

In the first four chapters of his letter to the Romans, Paul has been making the case for the necessity of Christ's death and resurrection for all people. Human beings keep placing other things above God and regularly fail to keep his commands, even when trying to be faithful. We end up getting stuck in this cycle of belief and behavior:

- God is good

[1] *Source: Bryan Chapell, Holiness By Grace (Crossway Books, 2001), pp. 22-23; used by permission of Crossway Books, a division of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois 60187, www.crosswaybooks.org*

- I'm bad
- Try harder

But here's the problem. In Romans chapter seven, Paul will say even when we're trying really, really hard to be obedient, we will keep falling short. We will keep digging a hole we can't get ourselves out of – "oh wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?" Who will get us out of this cycle of insanity, of doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results? There is simply no work we can do to earn God's salvation, not enough points we can put on the good side of the ledger.

Nothing. We are powerless, helpless, incapable. But in God's economy, that's not bad news, because that's not the end of the story. It's just the beginning, because God is powerful, willing to help, and fully capable of doing something about our situation.

Because God has now, at just the right time, Paul says, (in the fullness of time as Galatians 4:4 says), provided a redo, a start-over with a clean slate. It is God's way of balancing the ledger, of making the math work. We know it by a fancy word which Paul uses here called justification. Justification is God's way of wiping the slate clean, having replaced our sin with Christ's righteousness, and choosing to credit that to our account. Now, having been justified by faith, through what Christ has done, we have been put in right relationship with God. Justification is the process by which we have peace with God.

This is not a negotiated peace, because we had nothing to bring to the table. We don't have anything to give or to negotiate with. God has all the chips. But thankfully, God had a plan that flows out of who he is, his values if you will. That value is God's desire to be gracious and to show mercy. On our side of the equation, this is what grace looks like: Grace means we get something we don't deserve and can't achieve. Grace doesn't make sense, because it breaks the pattern of retribution, tit for tat, giving something to get something. Grace means we simply receive what God has done. And what he has done was very costly. It wasn't cooking the books. Sin had to be dealt with, so he sends his son to die for us…while we were still sinners. Paul wants us to understand how unprecedented and even mind-blowing this is. Human beings wouldn't do it for a righteous person and rarely would do it for a good person, he says. To die for a sinful or ungodly person? Of course not!

This is the gospel. God gives us something we don't deserve. The initiative is all his, coming when we are lost, impotent, ignorant and indifferent. Sometimes it is only those who know they are lost, know they are broken, who can best experience the abundant grace God wants to offer. In Luke 7, a woman comes to the place where Jesus is eating with both friends and enemies waiting to trip him up. She lets down her hair, and washes his feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair. The Pharisees can't get over that she has violated the protocols and blurred the lines of what was appropriate to do. "If he were truly a prophet," they mock, "there's no way he would have let a sinful woman touch him." Because the holy avoided contamination with the unholy. Nice girls didn't let down their hair or touch a strange man.

Her actions reveal her desperate need to be loved, to be forgiven. She needs grace, she knows it, and she risks everything to come to the one who can provide it.

Peace of God

The result of justification is peace with God, which is the starting point of our faith. This is done by God, but must be appropriated, lived into, by us. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, it was reported that although the wall was demolished, the east and west Germans still lived as if it were present. It still existed in their minds, memories and attitudes, preventing them from truly enjoying the unification of their country.

Paul wants our understanding of our peace *with* God to give us the peace *of* God. To live in a new way because of what God has done. A new way with God and with others. The word he uses here is reconciliation, which means the termination of enmity between two parties. Reconciliation enables us to be friends with God. To live with God and cultivate his presence.

Because we now have direct access to the celestial glory of God through Christ. Thus, we stand in an assured future. This certainty of our destination transforms our journey, making it all significant and purposeful. We can even rejoice in our struggles or our sufferings, Paul says, because they can have a holy purpose. For in those times of pressure, God strengthens our resolve to endure. He strengthens our resistance to the temptations and challenges that come our way. It's a long obedience forward of trusting in God who will complete the task he started. Justification by grace through faith is a past completed action, but one that has ongoing consequences. We were established in grace, but we are maintained in that grace as well. Grace abounds – amazing, reckless, unmerited grace.

Ultimately, this will lead us to a hope that doesn't disappoint, for our confidence is not rooted in what we do or accomplish, but in God's love for us.

Grace in Action

"Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning," Dallas Willard once said. This means the motivation for our works has now changed. We are not trying to earn God's love, we are trying to demonstrate ours. Because God's love has generated ours – we love because he first loved us. In Ephesians 2:10, Paul will remind us that because we are God's workmanship, his creation, and he has created us for a purpose, for good works! We might call this grace in action. Because grace receivers, those who have had their hearts changed by God and are completely aware that WE stand by God's grace, are motivated to extend that grace to others.

In comedian Nate Bargatze's book *Big Dumb Eyes*, he tells an amazing story about his father, who grew up with an abusive mother. At the age of three, Stephen was left outside a bowling alley while his mother went into bowl. A bulldog attacked and bit him in the face, tearing it open from cheek to chin and even taking of his tongue. This would result in six years of reconstructive surgeries and a permanent speech impediment. More abuse would follow, until

Bargatze left home as a teenager, living on the streets for a while, before being taken in by his cousin, Ronnie, and his wife Melinda. When Stephen had to have shoulder surgery for an old injury caused by his mother, while his arm was in a cast, Melinda helped him take a much needed bath. It was a life-changing moment for him, the first time in his whole life he had experienced love and tenderness. Ronnie and Melinda took Stephen with them to church, where he heard about the gracious action God had done for him, that he had sent his Son to die for him, Stephen. Stephen committed his life to Christ and his transformation process began.

One evidence of this change came years later, when Stephen went to visit his mother on her deathbed. He hadn't seen her for years, and his children didn't know her at all. So when Stephen visited his mom, the one who had abused and abandoned him, he did something amazing. He apologized to her for not being a better son, for not trying harder to enable her to have a relationship with her grandchildren. He asked for *her* forgiveness. This extension of undeserved grace caused something to melt in her, paving the way for a moment of reconciliation with her son. She died the next day.

As grace receivers, we are called to have a grace orientation to life. What does this look like in our community of faith? Having a grace orientation means people don't have to clean up their act before joining us here. It means we invite people to discover and share their gifts, whether they've been here two years or 30. Having a grace orientation means we don't get so caught up in the letter of the law that we ignore the spirit. It means we put people before principle unless constrained by commandment. It means we are seed sowers, not soil testers, and we scatter that seed lavishly, because we know that the grace we are giving comes from a well that will never run dry. When we live with the value of grace, others are attracted through us to the giver of that grace.

He is the one who meets us at this table, where we are reminded of the costly nature of the gift, that Christ laid down his life for us, giving his body and his blood, so that we might receive forgiveness for our sins. It has been said that communion is the Presbyterian's altar call, our opportunity to come again to the foot of the cross, to confess all that we've done or failed to do, and to experience again the freedom that forgiveness brings.

Paul says, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Then he answers his own question: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Amen.