

Grace, we talk about it all the time in church; we all love to sing “Amazing Grace,” and know many of the verses by heart; but have you ever sat down and tried to define what grace really means to you personally? Someone once said, “If there were only a half-dozen words in our vocabulary, ‘grace’ should be one of them.” So this morning, let’s discuss what grace means to those of us who have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Now, I know that this is too big a subject to try and wrap our heads around in one message, but let me try and identify a few key points.

The Bible speaks of grace in many beautiful ways such as, the exceeding riches of God’s grace, His abundant grace, and His manifold grace. The Bible is full of references to grace; however, the passage that I would like for us to focus on this morning is found in the third chapter of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, verses 21-26.

Read Romans 3:21-26

Now verse 23 has been quoted a lot: “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” In other words we have not lived up to what God intended us to be when He first created the human race. Just look at the world around us today; I don’t think any of us would argue with Paul’s statement. Is anybody perfect or has anyone not sinned at sometimes in their lives, or even sometime this morning?

A pastor and an elderly church member were discussing a relative of hers who had seen the light and joined the church after a lifetime of wild and sinful living. “Will the sins of my converted cousin be forgiven, pastor?” She asked. “Oh, yes certainly! Remember the greater the sin, the greater the saint.” The woman thought silently for a moment and then said, “Oh, pastor, I wish I had known that fifty years ago.”

In Ephesians 2:8, Paul states: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is a gift from God.” This means that God both initiated salvation and then completed it. While many meanings have been associated with grace from a blessing before a meal to a personality, in the New Testament, grace primarily means the undeserved gift of God’s love. Grace is getting something from God that doesn’t belong to us. We cannot and do not deserve this grace. In grace, God does not give us what we deserve; instead, He gives us what we don’t deserve. Donald Barnhouse, a famous preacher from the past, said it best: “Love that goes upward is worship; love that goes outward is affection; and love that stoops down is grace.”

God saw us in our sinfulness and helplessness and realized that on our own, we could not overcome our tendency for sinning and become the people that He wants us to be. Think

about it, when we have been left to our own, look at how we as the human race have collectively made a mess of things over the years. It is only through God's intervention and grace that we have gotten this far. But God stepped into history over two thousand years ago and sent His Son to die on an old wooden cross for our sins. Grace and forgiveness of our sins were extended to each of us through the outstretched arms of Jesus Christ on that cross at Calvary.

In verse 24, Paul states a major Christian doctrine: "We are now justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Paul declares that the death of Jesus Christ has fully atoned for the sinfulness of humanity. God's righteousness is freely offered to us as sinners who receive it by faith recognizing that it is an undeserved gift of His grace. While we are all guilty of sin, if we put our trust in Jesus, God will pardon us because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. This legal verdict is valid because Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin. This is called justification – although we clearly deserve to be declared guilty, because of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, if we believe in Him and in faith accept Him as our Lord and Savior, we are offered God's gifts of forgiveness, mercy, salvation, and grace.

And is this forgiveness just a one-time occurrence? Listen to this fictitious letter from *In the Grip of Grace* by Max Lucado; it is written like it is from an insurance company responding to a claim. Of course, it's not a real letter, but it makes you think what it would be like if God limited how many times He would forgive us:

Dear Mrs. Kirby,

I'm writing in response to this morning's request for forgiveness. I'm sorry to inform you that you have reached your quota of sins. Our records show that, since employing our services, you have erred seven times in the area of greed, three times for lying, once for cheating on your taxes, and your prayer life is substandard when compared to others of the same age and circumstances.

Further review reveals that your understanding of the Christian doctrine is in the lower 20<sup>th</sup> percentile and that you have an excessive tendency to gossip. Because of your sins you are a high-risk candidate for heaven. You must understand that grace has its limits. My Son Jesus sends His regrets and kindest regards and hopes that you will find some other form of coverage. Sincerely, God.

Now thank goodness that this is not true, because all of us would have used up our quota for sins a long time ago, and of course, there is no other forgiveness out there like the grace that God offers to us through His Son Jesus Christ. There is no limit to God's love and grace for each of us. God's grace is not a one-time event in our lives, but it is there every day despite how often we fail to walk in His teachings and continue to fall short of becoming more like Jesus in

our thoughts, words and actions. Grace is more than a pardon; it is the power which makes it possible for us to meet the daily challenges that life throws our way.

It was this grace that enabled Paul, the zealous Pharisee, to love the Gentiles. Paul affirmed this in 1 Corinthians 15:10 when he wrote: "By the grace of God I am what I am." Paul realized that his life would have been a failure and useless without the grace of God. When you think of what Paul was prior to meeting Jesus on the Damascus Road – a persecutor, destroyer of the Early Church – and then what he became after that encounter with the Lord – an apostle to the Gentiles, missionary, soul-winner, writer of numerous letters in the Bible, and Christian martyr – we are bound to ask: "What made the difference?" There can be but one answer, and that is the grace of God.

Paul also knew that we are empowered by the grace of God. If you remember, Paul suffered from what he referred to in 2 Corinthians 12:7 as "a thorn in the flesh." Now we don't know exactly what this was, though some believe that it may have been migraine headaches, but whatever it was there was enough pain to make Paul cry out for help three times to the Lord. In reply to Paul's request, God tells him: "My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is made perfect in weakness." This means that through this "thorn" God was maturing Paul, molding him, preparing him for the tasks to which he was called and the person that he was meant to be. Our forefathers called this "enabling grace." In one of Robert Louis Stevenson's stories, "The Ebb Tide," one of his characters cries out: "Everything's grace. We walk upon it, we breathe it, we live and die by it; it makes the nails and axles of this universe."

Not only does God give us strength for each day, but His grace sustains us in every trial and from every pitfall that comes our way. Basically, He keeps us from falling. Grace is the key to life and is sufficient for our every need. We can rest on the blessed assurance that God's grace is more than sufficient for the unchangeable situations in our lives, the circumstances beyond our control, the handicaps we suffer, our sickness, and all other types of adversities that we may face. Whatever we are dealing with right now, like with Paul, the Lord tells us: "My grace is sufficient for you."

During the morning worship service one Sunday, a man came forward to sing "Amazing Grace." The man was doing his best, but like me, he couldn't carry a tune, and only hit enough notes to enable the audience to barely recognize the hymn. But one person in the congregation later remarked that "the words of Amazing Grace had never touched him as they did coming from that man." The singer may have been lacking in voice, but he had tears flowing down his face. He was singing from his heart, for he knew from his experiences that Jesus had truly saved him, and thus he sang with all his heart and soul.

Perhaps many in the congregation that day whispered to each other, saying, “Who let him sing?” or “What’s his problem?” Others may have felt uncomfortable during the song. Many would have chosen the best singer in the choir for the solo. But the most logical or conventional methods of expressing our faith are not always the right ones. Because of this man’s witness, many in attendance that morning walked away from the service with a deeper appreciation for the amazing grace offered by Jesus Christ.

A man dies and goes to heaven. Of course, Saint Peter meets him at the Pearly Gates. Peter tells him: “Here’s how it works. You need 100 points to get into heaven. You tell me all the good things you have done, and I’ll give you a certain number of points for each task, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you’re in.”

“Okay,” says the man, “Well, I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart.” “That’s wonderful,” replied Peter, “that’s worth 3 points.” “Only three points?” he asks. “Okay, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service.” “Terrific!” says Peter, “that’s certainly worth a point.” “One point? Golly. Well, how about this: I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans.” “Fantastic, that’s good for two more points,” Peter says. “TWO POINTS, you got to be kidding me!!” the man cries, “At this rate the only way I’m ever going to get into heaven is by the grace of God!” Peter smiles and says: “Come on in.”

Grace, it is freely given to each of us by a God who loves us more that we can ever imagine. God loved us so much that He sent His only Begotten Son to die on a cross for our sins so that we can experience His amazing gift of grace. Have you ever thought what each of the letters in grace means? G-R-A-C-E: “God’s riches at Christ’s expense.” Now that’s a good definition of grace.

Remember the first verse of Amazing Grace: “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.” What a beautiful thought. The amazing offer of God’s grace is available to us this morning. And communion is one way in which we experience this grace and love. Let His grace surround and embrace you as you receive communion this morning. Amen