

The 4th Sunday in Lent – March 10, 2024

Ephesians 2:1-10

Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, Wisconsin

Dear friends who live in God's grace,

The opening hymn, Amazing Grace, is one of the best known hymns in our country. Especially in times of tragedy and death you hear that soulful melody sung by a soloist a played on bagpipes. But do those who hear that hymn or even those who have sung it, do they know what God's grace is? Do you know what God's grace is all about?

Unfortunately, that hymn does not mention the greatest act of God's grace. Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying it's a bad hymn. And I'm sure that many Christians can't help but think about God's greatest act of grace as they sing those words. John Newton, who wrote that hymn, certainly knew and believed in God's greatest act of grace. What is it, you ask? God's greatest act of grace is his giving his only-begotten Son, Jesus, to die for our sins and to rise from the dead for our forgiveness. The Gospel (John 3:14-21) for today brought that home.

But I fear that so many in the world latch on to that hymn for the wrong reasons. Since the hymn doesn't mention Jesus by name, any type of religion could use those words. Even though no one can know God's grace except through Jesus, many who sing that hymn imagine that God's grace is simply there to make them feel better and give them the wishful hope that they will be saved no matter what they believe.

And what about you and me? We talk a lot about grace, but do we fully comprehend how undeserving we are of it? Do we stand in dumb-struck awe and amazement at what Jesus freely did for us by grace alone? Do we grasp the reality of God's grace so that we cannot do otherwise but respond with faith and good works that glorify God? Or is grace just another one of those church words?

I'm not sure who came up with the acrostic, but it really helps me focus on what God's grace is all about. It helps me remember his greatest act of grace. That acrostic is the theme for today: God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Take the first letter of each word and you have G R A C E, grace.

As we think about grace, we don't want to be misguided by the world's ideas but hold our minds captive to God's Word. This section in Ephesians chapter 2 is one of the best places in the Bible to show us what God's grace is all about. Through these words which God gave the Apostle, the Holy Spirit is eager to fill us with awe at God's grace.

For 1) God's grace is undeserved by us.

2) God's grace is only in Christ Jesus.

And 3) God's grace is for his glory.

These three points help us to see that only because of grace do we have

God's Riches At Christ's Expense.

1) God's grace is undeserved by us

Before we can comprehend what God's grace is and what his grace has done for us, we must see how undeserving we are. We often define grace as Undeserved Love. Usually when people show love, they are attracted by something in the other person – their personality, their looks, their interests.

There is nothing in us to attract God's love. Paul teaches us that we were dead in transgressions. We were spiritual road-kill, you might say. Nothing in us attracts us to God. We usually cannot get away from a dead skunk fast enough. Everything in us by nature was repulsive to God. In addition, just like a dead skunk, we could not move, we could not crawl out of the way. We couldn't pull ourselves toward God – we couldn't decide to do it, chose to do it, try to do it, or even want to do it. We were dead in sin, powerless, just like a dead animal on the road. And even more so, unlike road-kill which originally was alive, you and I began life dead, spiritually dead in sin. That was the nature we inherited from our parents. That is what works in us to corrupt our thoughts and will so that we follow the desires of our flesh. That inherited nature made us children under anger and wrath, not under God's grace.

Paul drives this point home in the first three verses of the chapter. *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. (Ephesians 2:1-3 NIV).*

We do not deserve anything from God except his hatred and punishment. Nothing that comes from us can save us. No work that we do can rescue us. Maybe one more illustration will help drive home the point that all of us are totally undeserving. Sometimes we get the idea that a really bad person, needs God's grace more than we do. That thinking not only cheapens grace, it is rejecting grace. If we think someone is more undeserving than us, that

means we think that we are little deserving. When that thought tempts you remember this story:

A large downtown church had three mission churches in the run-down part of town under its care. They came together for a joint worship service on the first Sunday of the year. At the communion table knelt a judge who belonged to the downtown church and also an ex-convict from one of the mission church.

Afterwards the judge commented to the pastor about God's miracle of grace, considering who was at the communion table. And the pastor agreed. Then the judge asked, "Who do you think I was referring to." And the pastor said, "The ex-convict you had sentenced." The judge replied, "I wasn't referring to him, but to myself. When that convict was released he knew how he had ruined his life and had no hope in himself. God brought him to see that in Jesus he had forgiveness, hope, and salvation. But look at me. From little on up I was taught to be good, to say prayers, to go church. I went to Oxford, passed the bar, and eventually became a respected judge. Nothing but God's grace could lead me to see that I am a sinner on the same level as that convict I sent to jail.

As sinners, we are all on the same level – by nature dead. We deserve only God's anger and punishment. But grace is undeserved love. We cannot earn or purchase God's grace. It comes at Christ's expense at that is why God's grace is only in Jesus.

2) God's grace is only in Jesus

We often remember Ephesians 2 because of how Paul emphasis God's grace. But listen again to this section and see that Paul also emphasis Jesus. Listen to how often Paul refers to Jesus Christ.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-7 NIV)

God's grace is inseparable from Jesus. Without Jesus we would always be dead in sin. Paul ties God's grace to Jesus by saying, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ . . . it is by grace you have been saved.

There is tremendous comfort for us when Paul says that we are *made alive with Christ*. Paul is putting our focus directly on God's greatest act of grace. We were dead in sin. Christ took our deadness on himself. Amazingly, he made himself sin for us. He put himself in our place.

Our sin, our punishment, our death, our hell, belonged to Jesus. Yes, Jesus certainly did die. He didn't deserve it. God's grace led him to do it willingly.

Not only did he die for us, but then God made him alive again. Because Jesus had paid for all sins, God accepted his death as payment in full. God had graciously forgiven sinners because of what Jesus had done. So God raised Jesus from the dead.

If Jesus bones were still in a tomb or on display as a relic, God's grace would have failed. We would all be dead in sins, just as dead as those bones. But just as surely as Jesus lives, just as surely as God made him alive, so also he surely forgives you and me because of his grace. For his grace unites us to Jesus so that we are made alive with Jesus.

That life came at Christ's expense and so God's grace is only in Jesus. Apart from Jesus is only death and hell. In Jesus is forgiveness and much more. For grace brings us God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Just as Jesus as raised from the dead, so also we will be raised from the dead and just as Jesus is seated in heaven, so also we who believe will be with him in heaven forever. Those eternal riches Jesus purchased for you at the expense of his life blood.

3) God's grace is to his glory

The more we see that God's grace is only in Jesus, the more we want to glorify our God and live for Jesus. We want to do good. We want to good not because we think we earn anything by it. By grace alone we have God's Riches At Christ's Expense, not our expense. *"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is a gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast."* (Ephesians 8, 9 NIV). Salvation is a gift, to think we can ask for it, or earn it, a pay a part of it is rejecting God's grace.

We want to do good not to boast or glorify ourselves, but we want to do good to bring glory to our God who has been so gracious to us. Just like when a person sees a great painting they talk about how skillful and good the artist is, when people see the way we live may they talk about how skillful and good our God is, *"for we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"* (Ephesians 2:10 NIV). As we live as new creation in Christ, as we glorify our God in our daily lives, others will learn from us about grace, God's Riches At Christ's Expense.

Next time you hear the hymn Amazing Grace remember God's greatest act of grace. Remember how Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead for your forgiveness. And remind those who are listening with you what God' amazing grace is all about. For the more we focus on what Jesus has done for us, the more God's grace enriches us.