

“Amazing Grace”

Ephesians 2:8–10; Romans 3:21–26 (NRSV)

Grace is God’s love in action.

This week and next, we are going to talk about grace -- pure, simple, and life-changing. Grace is the unmerited favor that God pours out on us and the unmerited favor that we pour out on one another. “Favor” speaks of a kindness, a blessing, a forgiving, looking the other way when a person makes a mistake or speaks harshly. “Unmerited” speaks of something that is neither earned nor deserved but is merely a gift, with no strings attached, given by God to us or by us to one another.



Sadly, we seem to live in a world that has forgotten the essential role that grace plays in all relationships. I came across this just a few days ago in a brief essay about the “cancel culture” in which people are banned from society for saying something objectionable or offensive.

And it’s hard to shake the feeling that part of what’s involved in cancel culture is a breakdown in personal charity. The idea that someone should be expunged from society for holding controversial (or, frankly, even objectionable) ideas can have troublesome implications. We are all of us flawed people, and part of living in brotherhood with others involves trying to see the virtues in others — to not let errors obscure the personhood of another.¹

The loss of grace, aka “charity,” is one of many tragic symptoms of the breakdown in our culture. But before we turn to the grace that we ought to bestow on one another, let’s consider the grace that God pours out on us. Understanding the depth of grace that God gives us all must begin with grasping the darkness, the sin, in our fallen human nature. If we can’t be honest about this, there is really no point in going on. *Yes, we are sinners! There is something wrong with us all!!*

In a column marking the centenary of the beginning of the First World War, Peggy Noonan wrote this for the Wall Street Journal:

Once a few years ago a reporter who had covered wars talked about this with a brilliant, accomplished, famously leftist editor in New York. At the end of a conversation on a recent conflict the reporter said, quizzically: “Why is there so much war? Why do we do that?”

“Because something’s wrong with us,” the editor replied.

I told him it was the best definition of original sin I’d ever heard.²

That’s it in a nutshell. There is something wrong with us. Every one of us. All of humanity. We Christians put a name to it, original sin, but that is merely a label. The truth we proclaim, and which has been self-evident over the course of human history, is that there is something wrong with us, something that we cannot fix, eradicate, or repair. It is as if we have a flaw in our “moral DNA” that no amount of training, education, effort, or good intentions can overcome.

Yet countless people persist in the belief that deep down they are okay, a good person, someone who can use some help and guidance, but, really, all right. And certainly, good enough for God to embrace us just as we are. But that’s a lie, grounded in self-delusion. And it blinds us to the gift of grace that God gives us all.

This self-delusion is growing at a fast pace across the national landscape. Talk to the average person in our society about their beliefs, and you are likely to discover that they have little sense that there is something deeply and desperately wrong with humanity, and certainly not with themselves. This loss of the knowledge of Sin is undercutting all our efforts to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, I have been convinced for some time that this loss of the knowledge of Sin is the single greatest obstacle to the growth of Christianity in America. The Good News is good news only if it is delivered in response to bad news. Otherwise, it is heard as Good Advice about how we can straighten up our lives or become better people. And no one gets too excited about good advice, much less follows it.

¹ By Fred Bauer, on the National Review website, September 25, 2019.

² Peggy Noonan, “The World the Great War Swept Away,” *The Wall Street Journal*, (August 8, 2014)

The Good News of Grace

In a culture that has lost the knowledge of Sin, Jesus can seem like an answer in search of a problem, a cure in need of an illness. But losing the knowledge of Sin makes Sin no less real. There has always been something wrong with us and there still is. Any objective look at the last century reveals that our scientific and technological advances have left human Sin untouched.

So yes, Jesus is the answer to the most real problem of all. We are in desperate need of rescue and we will never accomplish this ourselves. But God has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God has rescued us through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

There is no other answer, no other solution. Rescue cannot be had by any other means. There is no other path, no other route. In Jesus, God has done for us what must be done and what we would never do. This is genuinely Good News, this gift called grace, not merely great advice about how to love more or become a better person.

The Wesleys and Grace

John and Charles Wesley understood that it is love and grace that define God, grace being simply love in action. The cross, the sacrifice and faithfulness it embodied, takes us to the heart, the essence, of God. As Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." (from 2:4-8).

John Wesley spoke of grace in threefold terms of its work in our lives:

- prevenient grace
- justifying grace
- sanctifying grace

Prevenient grace

Wesley understood grace as God's active presence in our lives. This presence is not dependent on human actions or human response. It is a gift — a gift that is always available, but that can be refused.

God's grace stirs up within us a desire to know God and empowers us to respond to God's invitation to be in relationship with God. God's grace enables us to discern differences between good and evil and makes it possible for us to choose good. . . .

God takes the initiative in relating to humanity. We do not have to beg and plead for God's love and grace. God actively seeks us!

Justifying grace

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). And in his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul wrote: "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

These verses demonstrate the justifying grace of God. They point to reconciliation, pardon, and restoration. Through the work of God in Christ our sins are forgiven, and our relationship with God is restored. According to Wesley, the image of God — which has been distorted by sin — is renewed within us through Christ's death.

Again, this dimension of God's grace is a gift. God's grace alone brings us into relationship with God. There are no hoops through which we must jump in order to please God and to be loved by God. God has acted in Jesus Christ. We need only to respond in faith.

Sanctifying grace

We hold that the wonder of God's acceptance and pardon does not end God's saving work, which continues to nurture our growth in grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to increase in the knowledge and love of God and in love for our neighbor.

New birth is the first step in this process of sanctification. Sanctifying grace draws us toward the gift of Christian perfection, which Wesley described as a heart "habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor" and as "having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked."

This gracious gift of God's power and love, the hope and expectation of the faithful, is neither warranted by our efforts nor limited by our frailties.