

**MESSAGE: “Your Grace Is Enough”**

**Text: Ephesians 1:1-14**

**Purpose: the purpose of this message is to recognize and celebrate three expressions of God’s grace in our lives: prevenient, justifying and sanctifying.**

**Introduction**

- I. Prevenient: Grace that Calls (Us to Faith)**
- II. Justifying: Grace that Redeems (Us from Sin)**
- III. Sanctifying: Grace that Grows (Us into Disciples)**

**Response to the Word**

**My father came to regret the fact that he ever told me this story. When he was around 12-years-old, he was walking home from school one day with a girl he wanted to impress. On impulse, he decided to show her how brave he was. He picked up a small rock, caught her attention, and threw it straight up into the air. Confidently, he held his ground and would not budge. The rock landed squarely on his head, causing him to howl with discomfort. Suzi was not impressed. But when he told me, I was impressed enough to never let him forget it. And here I am, still getting mileage out of the story!**

**The efforts we pile-up in religious devotion, doing good things and living properly impress God just about as much as Suzi was impressed by watching Dad land a rock on himself. No matter how much we try to follow God’s way, sooner or later, usually sooner, we stumble and howl away from the discomfort we have brought upon ourselves. The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 2: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one can boast.” The only way to impress God is by responding to God’s grace with the simple trust of a child.**

**But what is ‘grace?’ We use the word in many ways. Sometimes we say ‘grace’ at the dinner table. I have a lovely niece who is named ‘Grace.’ If you go to King Richard’s Renaissance Fair, you will hear jousting knights addressing their King as “Your Grace.” When someone arrives late to a party he or she was expected at, we might sarcastically say, “It is so nice of you to ‘grace’ us with your presence.” And, of course, we sing of grace, “Grace, grace, God’s grace, grace that is greater than all my sin...”**

**I attended a men’s conference some years ago in Atlanta, Georgia. There was a pastor there who had never visited the south before. One morning, he went to a restaurant for breakfast with colleagues. When his order arrived, he was dismayed by a serving of white mush on his plate. He stopped the waitress, “What is this?”**

**“Why that’s grits, darlin’!”**

**“I didn’t order that, and I won’t pay for it,” he replied with a scowl.**

**“Well isn’t that just the greatest thing? Down here, you don’t order it and you don’t pay for it, but you get it anyway!”**

**That’s not a bad definition for grace: “You don’t order it and you don’t pay for it, but you get it anyway!” But don’t get the idea that it’s cheap. It is nothing of the sort. It may not cost the receiver anything, but it does cost the giver.**

**In his book, *The Ragmuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning relates a story about Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia that illustrates this. Mayor LaGuardia was mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and all of World War II and was affectionately called “Little Flower” because he was five foot four and always wore a carnation in his lapel. He was a colorful character who rode the city’s fire trucks, accompanied the police on raids to speakeasies and took entire orphanages to baseball games. When the newspapers were on strike, he went on radio to read the Sunday funnies to the kids.**

**On a winter’s night in January 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took his place. A tattered woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told the Mayor that her daughter’s husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom she had stolen the bread, refused to let it go.**

**“It’s a real bad neighborhood, your Honor.” He said. “She’s got to be punished or others will do the same.”**

**“LaGuardia sighed, turned to the woman and said, “I’ve got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions: ten dollars or ten days in jail.’ But even as he pronounced sentence, he reached in his pocket, took out a bill and tossed it into his trademark sombrero. “Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this room fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Baliff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.”**

**Next day, the newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a much-relieved grandmother who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren., fifty cents**

of that amount being contributed by a red-faced grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, traffic violators and policemen, each of whom had given fifty cents to the cause, gave the mayor a standing ovation.” Someone underwrites the cost of grace dispensed, but never the receiver.

And sometimes the price-tag is incredibly dear. In one of the church’s I attended as a teen, we sang a hymn that reflected on the crucified Christ with this lyric, “I had a debt I could not pay; he paid a debt he did not owe...” As I experience it, Jesus laid down his life so I could have one.

In Christian theology, we identify three expressions of God’s grace: prevenient grace, justifying grace and sanctifying grace. Each is a gift of God, freely given, with no strings attached. In fact, sometimes God’s generosity with grace annoys us. Jesus told a parable in which an owner of a vineyard hires laborers at different intervals of the day. Those hired early in the morning agree to work for a daily wage. Those hired at 9 am, 12 noon and 3 pm, two hours before quitting time, do not know how much they will be paid. When wages are dispersed, each worker is given the same amount. I have always found it intriguing how much people squirm when this story is told. “It doesn’t seem fair!” they protest along with the early morning workers. But that is the point. Grace isn’t about fair; it is grace, unmerited, unearned, freely given. No doubt the vineyard owner knew that each worker had a family to care for, and he chose to provide what was needed.

Prevenient grace is grace that precedes human decision. It is grace that comes before we choose to be a follower of Jesus. It takes many forms. The mountains, oceans, foliage and clouds declare their Maker’s artistry. They are an example of prevenient grace. The grandparent, mentor, Sunday School teacher or friend who first tells us of their faith in God is an example of prevenient grace. The radio or TV message that calls us to faith is an example of prevenient grace. Even the challenges that prompt us to go deeper in a search for life’s purpose and meaning are an example of prevenient grace.

Before our grandson, Jonah, was born in London a year-and-a-half ago, we anticipated his arrival. We sent clothing, blankets and toys for a newborn. Melissa’s Mom made arrangements to fly to London as soon as the delivery was immanent to help for a week or two. Jonah’s parents attended prenatal appointments, delivery classes and read articles for new parents. Steps were taken to make sure expenses would be covered. All of these were prevenient in their anticipation of Jonah’s birth. And so it is with spiritual birth as well. God calls us to faith in more ways than we can imagine, and our ability to respond to God’s call is also secured by God’s design.

Justifying grace is the grace that redeems us from sin. It, too, is a free gift of God given through the self-offering of Jesus upon a cross. It is the paying of a debt that each of us owes, but can never satisfy. When rabbinical teachers, students of the Law given through Moses, asked Jesus in John, chapter 6, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” It is not a question of doing this, or doing that, or some other thing; it is a question of faith, ‘Do I trust in God’s grace?’

Let us suppose that you are given a gift addressed to you from under a Christmas tree. It has been chosen for you, purchased for you, perhaps made from scratch for you. But the benefit comes when the gift is opened and received. You could hand it back, unopened, saying I do not want this. Sadly, there are those who do this with some of the gifts God offers. But what did the liturgist text from John, chapter one say? “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God.”

Having received freedom through the justifying grace of God, we then face the question, “How shall we then live?” Someone confronted Martin Luther, the Christian Reformer, regarding his view of justifying grace by saying, “If this is true, a person could simply live as he pleased!”

‘Indeed!’ Luther responded, “Now, what pleases you?”

When we awaken to Christ’s presence in our life, the seed of grace that has been planted begins to germinate, to sprout, to grow. The reckless, selfish dance of our ‘former life’ is displaced by the joyful, compassionate dance of our ‘newer life.’ This is the gift of *sanctifying* grace--a grace that will not quit until we become all that God has created us to be. Billy Graham describes it like this: “Salvation is free, but discipleship costs everything you have.”

Like prevenient and justifying grace, sanctifying grace is God’s gift, freely given, no strings attached. We don’t make ourselves holy; we become holy as we grow in grace. God’s love and the fruits of the Holy Spirit begin to flow from our hearts into the lives of those around us. Our lives do not become problem-free, but they do become grace-filled.

Let me close with one more metaphor of grace. In his book, *Tell me About It*, Jeffrey Zaslow recalls that his father once coached a team of eight-year-olds in baseball. He had a few good players, but others who just didn’t ‘get it.’ His team didn’t win once all season. But in the last inning of the last game, his team was only down by a run. There was one boy

**who had never hit a ball, and never caught a ball. With two outs, it was his turn to bat. He surprised everyone by hitting a single!**

**The next batter was the team slugger. Finally, the team might win a game. Bat and ball connected, and the boy who hit the single made for second base. He saw the ball coming toward him, and forgetting the rules of the game, reached out and caught it. Final out! Dad's team lost!**

**Quickly, Dad told his team to cheer. The boy beamed. It never occurred to him that he lost the game. All he knew was he had hit a ball and caught a ball, both for the first time. No one told him what he had done. By the gift of grace, he was a champion! And so are we!**