

Reformation 500 part 2: Grace alone

Ephesians 2:1-10

(Mark 10:13-16)

Let's pray- *God of mercy, you promise never to break your commitment to us. Amid all the changing words of our world, speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

In last week's sermon, we paid attention to some of the things that Jesus said about himself, and we noticed that Jesus is **radically exclusive**. He said 'I AM the way, the truth and the life. Nobody can get to God except through me'. This scandalised people back when Jesus said it, and it has the power to scandalise people today. But we noted that Jesus was **radically inclusive** as well. If someone came to him with even a shred of faith, whoever they were, whatever their past, whatever they'd done, however others looked at them, Jesus offered them his love, his presence, his forgiveness. A paralytic on mat, a woman caught in a cycle of abusive relationships, religious leaders, roman soldiers, a collaborator, Samaritans, hypocrites, people wracked with grief, people wracked with guilt, several maniacs and demon-possessed people, prostitutes, lepers...

Jesus shows grace by the bucketload, which caused controversy among those who saw themselves as being on the right side of the respectability line- '*How can you keep company with them?*'

Those grumbles didn't put Jesus off. Many people experienced a grace and a love from Jesus that they'd experienced nowhere else, and in doing so had a hunger satisfied- a hunger far deeper than they realised.

Our world is starving for grace. When you see real, costly, deep grace it makes ripples. An example- a shooting in an Amish school in Pennsylvania, 2006. A man with a gun got into a classroom and shot ten young schoolgirls, before shooting himself. In the midst of their grief over this shocking loss, the Amish community didn't cast blame, they didn't point fingers, they didn't hold press conferences. They reached out with grace and compassion towards the killer's family. The same day as the shooting, Amish neighbours visited the family to comfort them in their shock and pain. Dozens turned up at the killer's funeral, to comfort his family.

This message of forgiveness caused waves- not just across the USA, but around the world. I was reading this week about converts to Christ in China who quoted that story as a reason they'd become Christians. One Chinese blogger wrote *'when the word of Christ 'Father, forgive them, is put into practise- it speaks so loud that the world may hear'*.

Bertrand Russell, the viciously atheistic philosopher said – *'what this world needs, I'm afraid to say, is Christian love'*

We live in a world that is hungry for Grace. I want to convince you today that our hunger for Grace is just the tip of the iceberg- The Bible shows us that our **need for Grace** is greater than we realise, that through Christ **we are loved more** than we can imagine, and this was bought for us at a **greater cost than** we can imagine. Please turn with me to page 1174 as we look closer at today's Bible passage.

Part one: The need for Grace

Paul is writing to a group of Christians to remind them of who they are, and where they've come from. The language here is uncompromising- *'you were dead in your transgressions and sins'*- then verse 3 *'gratifying the cravings of our flesh, and following its desires and thoughts'*. You weren't biologically dead, he says, but you were spiritually dead. This is a diagnosis of our whole condition outside of God- we're alienated from him, entirely unable to reach him or impress him by our own efforts. We're not just spiritually ill- people who can at least drag themselves to a hospital or take their tablets- but dead. We cannot resuscitate ourselves.

This reference to the 'cravings of the flesh' isn't about sex, but it's about the distortion in us- all the ways we try to plug the gap, whatever that might be. However good or worthy some of our behaviour might be, without God's grace, we are attempting to dig ourselves out of a hole.

This doesn't mean we're incapable of doing good deeds without Christ- *there are plenty of people who aren't Christians who live lives that are more ethical than mine*- but it means that those good things won't change our status before God or solve our basic problem; sin and selfishness goes so deep that nothing we do remains uncontaminated. We are each of us, (see end of verse 3) by nature objects of wrath; his judgement is clear upon each one of us.

Part two: The depth of Grace

The extent to which we grasp the depth of our need is the measure with which we will grasp how deep the gift of Grace in Christ is. Let's look at verse 4-5 *'because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy- made us alive in Christ'*. In spite of everything we do to him, to one another, to ourselves- God sent Christ. God is merciful. God is good. These few verses are a brief overview of the gift of salvation- we don't have time to pause long and savour these today- but I want to impress upon our hearts the outrageous generosity of God towards those found in Christ.

When we talk about sin, and then about God forgiving us in Christ on the Cross, we can sometimes suppose that God only loves us through gritted teeth, as if we were allowed in heaven on a technicality. All right, we imagine God saying- you can come in, you're saved, after all- but don't make too much noise. Try not to disturb the other guests.

Let's pause with a thought for the moment. Imagine Christ's return to heaven, after the Resurrection. Jesus has lived a full, perfect, flawless human life, and always obeyed perfectly. He has taken death on head first, voluntarily taken on the full force of God's wrath, taken on death, fought the bravest fight...

Imagine the look on the Father's face as he returns. His conquering Son. Imagine the celebration. Imagine the pride. Imagine the party. **If you're a Christian, that's what's coming to you.** – verse 6 *raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms*. His victory medals are yours. Just as if you'd lived the perfect life- that's where you are in Christ.

I wonder if you remember this story from the Rugby world cup final in 2015- that's a great picture of this. This lad tries to get onto the pitch after the final whistle, and is treated roughly by a security guard. Sonny Bill Williams- who'd just won- runs over and gives him the medal. That's a great picture of Grace.

I'm sure he went to school on Monday beaming- but he'd have drastically misunderstood the situation if he came home and told his friends that he personally had won the rugby world cup! That's what verses 7-9 tell us- that our salvation is a demonstration of *the incomparable riches of his grace*. God looks at us and says 'that is how good I am'- That's how generous, how merciful I am.

We- his church- are a **trophy** of God's grace. A quote from a commentary I've been reading- *'throughout time and in eternity, the church, this society of pardoned rebels, is designed by God to be the masterpiece of his goodness.'*
A Society of pardoned rebels (tagline for the website)

So as Christians we have nothing to boast about. No reason to think we're better than anyone else. see verse 8 and 9- it is not from yourselves. Every part of our salvation is a gift. Even our choice to turn to Christ is a gift from God. When I get to heaven, and Christ asks me 'why are you here' I won't say 'well... I was a little bit more spiritually-minded than my non-Christian friends, I was a bit smarter, a bit more heavenly minded... all I will have is 'thank you'.

We had a perfect picture of that a few minutes ago when we baptised Isla. She had no say in the matter whatsoever. We didn't make her take an exam. We trust and pray that one day she will take those promises made on her behalf today for herself. But for today, this is a sign that God's grace goes before her. God acts first.

So what else are we rescued for? Verse 10- 'to do Good works'-. . There'll be more on that next week, as we talk about Faith- the life of Faith is one that will naturally spill out into doing good things that God has planned for us.

And finally, **the cost of Grace**- *'the great love with which he loved us'*. I've not time to go in deep on this point. But we remember that real love is always costly. Real forgiveness is costly. Grace is costly. *How deep the father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure*, we just sung. A beautiful melody, but we were singing of something horrific. Christ gave up everything he had for us, bleeding to death, crying out to the sky *where are you, Father*- and for the first time in eternity, hearing only silence.

There is no depth that Christ would not go to in order to win you back. No pain he wouldn't go through. *I love my children- but I know somewhere in me is a line I could not cross for them*. Not so with God. That's the depth of God's grace for us. My hope and prayer for you, for me, for all of us- is that we might come to trust in God's grace alone, as our beautiful gift in Christ, as our hope and our Joy.

Gracious God- thank you. Amen.

