

1. A Ministry of Grace

2 Corinthians 1:1-2, 5:17-21

National's Mission

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[Real Audio \(2 MB\)](#)

In the church of my teenage years I sat under a ministry of judgment. What I heard from the pulpit week after week were sermons full of censure followed by an altar call that consigned us to hell if we did not come forward and repent of our sins.

Now, my pastor was a wonderful man -- outside the pulpit. His parsonage was open house, day and night. He came to our beach parties, played a mean game of volleyball, and romped with us in the surf. But when he mounted the pulpit, it was as if he had to notch his Bible with a fresh batch of converts, so he threw the book at us every week. Back then my main motive for believing in Christ was, quite simply, to escape the wrath of God.

Over the years I have come to hear a quite different motif in the Bible. So, by the way, did my pastor. Not long after I entered seminary, so did he. And it was in seminary that he and I discovered it isn't wrath but grace that is the dominant theme in Holy Scripture. For example, every letter written by the Apostle Paul begins and ends with grace. Check it out for yourself, though not now, please, during the sermon! In his second letter to the church at Corinth, for example, he begins with this salutation: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:2). And he ends the letter with the now famous Trinitarian benediction: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you (13:13). No matter how dysfunctional the congregation, no matter how many times Paul has to tell them to shape up, he begins and ends every letter with grace.

Grace fore and aft, as if to say, God's grace surrounds you not only when you sing hymns in this sanctuary. Grace envelops you when a colleague spreads gossip behind your back. Grace enfolds you when you learn that surgery is the only option. Grace embraces you when you lose a loved one. Grace encompasses you when, for the umpteenth time, you fail to live up to your own ideals, let alone God's. Wherever you are, whatever you do, grace wraps you in the everlasting arms of God your Savior. And in recognition of the ubiquity of grace in the Bible, National Presbyterian Church has adopted as its vision statement, A ministry of grace, passionate about Christ's mission in the world.

And what is grace? Simply put, grace means that you and every other person in the world are the objects of God's singular favor. God esteems you, God loves you, God wants nothing more than to have you back in the family. So while it's true that your sins have separated you from God, God has gone to great lengths to heal the breach. That's why a cross is the focal point in this sanctuary. God made you alive, Paul wrote in Colossians 2:13, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. Cross and grace are synonyms in God's thesaurus.

To help you grasp and grow in God's grace, here are three labels to stick on your refrigerator door. God's grace is unsolicited, unmerited, and unending.

God's grace is unsolicited. You don't have to ask for it, you need not apply for it, there are no forms to fill out, no one will do a background check on you. The fact is God has been reaching out to you long before you were aware of it.

That, by the way, is why we baptize babies. Baptism is a sign of God's love for the child long before the child is able to respond to God. God is the prime mover at the baptismal font. God is there, pledging to that child God's sure love and unsolicited favor.

For many years I considered that my Christian life began at the age of 12 when I made my first public

profession of faith. I told everyone that October 18, 1946, was the date on my spiritual birth certificate. What I failed to take into account was my baptism twelve years earlier in Santa Barbara's Augustana Lutheran Church. I don't remember the occasion, but God does. And from that day forward God graciously planted seeds of faith and faithfully nurtured them until I personally responded at age 12. That event was a milestone on my Christian journey, but it wasn't the first step. The first step was taken at the Augustana baptismal font. Grace is unsolicited. It is there all along, which means that when you become aware of God's grace, it's yours simply for the receiving.

Again, grace is unmerited. You need not pay for it, you cannot earn it, you will never deserve it. It's yours just because God chooses to act graciously toward you.

This for many is the most implausible article in the Christian faith. Believing in the Trinity is child's play compared with trusting in God's unmerited favor. I suppose it has something to do with the way we are brought up. My childhood was full of aphorisms, such as, God helps those who help themselves. Idle hands are the devil's playground. There's no such thing as a free lunch. In other words, Rewards come only to those who merit them. School, with its examinations and grades, reinforces the theology of merit. And so does the workplace, with its annual reviews and raises, all based on merit.

So I sometimes hear Christians say, I hope I've been good enough to make it to heaven. Dear friends, only Jesus was good enough to make it to heaven, and the good news is that he has arranged to take us with him, free of charge. Grace is unmerited, pure gift, so our only appropriate response is to say thank you.

Finally, grace is unending. The Apostle Paul said it best: I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

I was being hard on myself one day a few years ago. I forget the reason, only that I was feeling unworthy of God's trust and afraid that God might have given up on me. My friend John listened for a few minutes, and then said, Tom, God loves you and you can't do anything about it.

I invite you to put your name in that sentence: Mary, Bill, John, Betty: God loves you, and you can't do anything about it. Repeat it to yourself several times a day until you can begin to rest in the assurance that God's grace to you is unsolicited, unmerited, and, above all, unending.

A friend in a former church died earlier this year. Patsy Weyerhaeuser Black was a brilliant Bible teacher, and Patsy was a poet. Carol and I had dinner Thursday evening with her son and daughter-in-law, Joe and Marilyn Black, and as we talked about Patsy's poetry Joe quoted the final piece in her collection of published works. It's entitled R.S.V.P., and it's quite brief: Today I received an invitation to a homecoming, signed Emmanuel. It said, "Come as you are." Come as you are: that's grace. And you can r.s.v.p. today by committing or recommitting your life to Christ. You need bring no references, nor must you clean up your act beforehand. Because Jesus says, Come as you are.