

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 27, 2019
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

GREAT IS THE LORD AND MOST WORTHY OF PRAISE

Deuteronomy 10:12-22 (NIV)

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ... the LORD set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, ... he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes.

Dear friends in Christ:

How do you define “grace”? There are numerous definitions: the free and unmerited favor of God; God’s undeserved love. Those are some of the more common definitions. And they are good definitions – but here’s one that takes things a step further: “God’s grace isn’t just getting something we don’t deserve; it’s getting the opposite of what we deserve.”

In his grace God has declared us worthy of eternal life for Christ’s sake. That’s just the opposite of what we deserved as Paul reminds us. **For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Romans 6:23 NIV)

Although it is important for us to understand the meaning of God’s grace, it’s even more important for us to live under his grace. Our text for today helps us to understand that God’s grace to us leads us to “declare, great is the Lord and most worthy of praise” not only with our lips but with our lives.

The words of our text were originally addressed to a people who were also living under God’s grace. They too had received from the Lord the very opposite of what they deserved. They were a people who had grumbled and complained against the Lord. Their parents and grandparents had done the same – many of them even turned away from the Lord to worship false gods and idols.

But what had God done for them? God enlarged this nation and made its people as numerous as the stars, just as he had promised Abraham. He had rescued them from their slavery in Egypt. Now they are looking forward to living in the land of promise. He himself had redeemed them and set them free and now he was calling them to be like him. Not to be lost in all of this is the fact that he had revealed himself to them as the Lord – the God of free and faithful grace as he described himself to Moses. (Exodus 34:6-7 NIV) **"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, (7) maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin..."**

As we consider the words of our text we need to bear in mind that fact that God’s call to Israel asking them to fear him, to walk in his ways, to love, serve and obey him is something which reflects a covenant that the Lord had established with his people that he would be their Savior God. God asked for their obedience not so that they could become his people but because he had already made them his own.

And the Lord in his grace has done similar things for us.

1. He redeemed us so we can belong to him
2. He renews us so we can become like him

Therefore we declare [*Theme:*] Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise.

Let's examine our text for evidence of God's claim on his Old Testament people. **To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.** So why would the people of Israel be special? Surely it wasn't because of who they were or what they had done.

The Psalmist leads us to ask the same thing. (Psalm 8:1, 3-4 NIV) **LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens. ... (3) When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, (4) what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?** Surely we have not earned or deserved the Lord's expressions of love and concern.

Our text explains how God demonstrated his care for Israel. **the LORD set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations--as it is today.** The Lord had a special relationship with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants choosing them from among the nations to be his special people.

But this was only part of the picture. God promised Abraham that all nations of the earth would be blessed through his offspring. God was thinking of us and many others with this promise. God's rescue of his people from Egypt foreshadowed a greater rescue – the rescue of sinners from the slavery to sin, death and the devil so that they could serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness for all their days. This would be the nation from which the seed of the woman who would crush Satan's head would be born. God's own Son would be born into this nation to set them and all nations free from the curse of sin.

Indeed this great rescue or redemption came about when God raised up Jesus as the provider of our salvation in keeping with his promises to Abraham and his descendants. Zechariah sang of the fulfillment of these promises following the birth of his son whom the angel of the Lord had told him would prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. (Luke 1:68-75 NIV) **"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. (69) He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (70) (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), (71) salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us-- (72) to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, (73) the oath he swore to our father Abraham: (74) to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear (75) in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.**

In his grace God provides for all the needs of his children even those who might seem to be neglected. **He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.** Moses reminded the people: **He is your praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes.**

With words from Luther's Small Catechism we confess that the Lord is also our praise, our God who performed great and awesome wonders for as we speak of the redemption that is ours in Christ.

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord. Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.

Luther's words remind of the main thoughts of our text by pointing to the wonderful blessings which we enjoy because of Christ Jesus.

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise.

1. He redeemed us so we can belong to him
2. He renews us so we can become like him

It's is only when we belong to the Lord through faith in Christ that that we have been renewed to become like him. The Scriptures remind us that **“flesh gives birth to flesh.”** But they also assure us that we have been born again. (1 Peter 1:23 NIV) **For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh but Spirit gives birth to spirit.** (John 3:6 NIV)

The Apostle Paul describes those who have been called to faith or born again of the Spirit as a people who (Colossians 3:10 NIV) ... **have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.** As we consider the Lord's commands to his people in our text we can see how he is asking them (and us) to mirror or reflect his actions in our dealings with him and others.

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, (13) and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

This is really what God had in mind with the First Commandment which says that we should have no other God's before him. He commands us to stand in awe and respect of him, to love him because he first loved us; to walk in his ways and to serve him because he walked in our ways and served us. (Hebrews 2:14-15 NIV) **Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil-- (15) and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.**

Next God says: **circumcise your hearts therefore and do not be stiff-necked any longer.** This command needs a bit of explanation. For the Old Testament Israelites circumcision was an outward physical rite. Many of their neighbors used this act to mark the passage from boyhood into manhood. But it was different among the Lord's people. Only Israel circumcised eight day old baby boys because only in Israel was circumcision a sign of a covenant that God had made with his people. Circumcision was a physical reminder of their status under God's grace in choosing them to be the nation from which all nations of the earth would be blessed. Circumcision had a spiritual significance as we are reminded by God's command to circumcise your hearts. An uncircumcised heart is one which is hardened against the Lord and refuses to hear and apply his words. The Old Testament Laws commanding circumcision on the eight day are no longer applicable to us since they were part of the ceremonial Law which pointed ahead to Christ. However the Lord still beckons us to worship him with uncircumcised hearts.

These words are a call to faith in the Lord our God who is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, might and awesome – surely such a God is worthy of our praise!

In the New Testament the Apostle Paul encourages our praise with these words: (Ephesians 5:1-2 NIV) **Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children (2) and walk in the way of love, just as Christ**

loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. His words calling upon us to be imitators of Christ reflect the words of our text.

Moses had already spoken about God's care for the fatherless and the widows and the aliens. Now he makes this application for God's people. Mirror or reflect my love in your relationships with others. **And you are to love those who are foreigners...** God is referring to strangers and foreigners who might enter into the land he was giving Israel. Typically these would be under privileged individuals who might easily become victims of others. However since the Savior God loved them we too are to love them as our neighbor.

And finally in our text we are commanded to enjoy our relationship with our heavenly Father. **Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name.**

Hold fast – hug tightly, cling to the Lord your God. Just as hugging might express the love a husband has for his wife or a child for their parent so Moses is encouraging us to put our words into action. Don't just say I love you – show that love to the Lord God with your acts of service. Cling to him and don't let anything separate you from him because he alone is the source of your salvation.

Take your oaths in his name is another phrase which might benefit from some explanation. With those words the Lord is simply asking us to rely on him as the one who will provide all that we need. The Lord and the Lord alone is worthy of our allegiance.

Let's summarize some of the lessons we can take home from this text.

1) In his grace the Lord has made us his own people by calling us to faith in Christ Jesus who became one of us so that he could walk in our shoes under God's law and keep it perfectly for us. He continued walking in our shoes all the way to the cross where he suffered death for us so that we might receive the gift of eternal life. It is in Christ that we see the greatness of our God which evokes our praise.

2) In his grace the Lord has renewed us – giving us new life through faith in him so that we can be like him – reflecting his love in our lives as an expression of praise to our great Lord in this life while we await for him to take to glory where we will praise him in everlasting, righteousness, innocence and blessedness forever.

Great is the Lord and Most Worthy of Praise. Amen.