

Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 11, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

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Ephesians 2:4-10 (NIV)

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5) made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--**it is by grace you have been saved.** 6) And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7) in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8) For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9) not by works, so that no one can boast. 10) For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Fellow recipients of God's saving grace;

The season of Lent provides us all with an opportunity to focus on the facts and details of Christ's suffering and death. As we do that, we make the general application. He suffered and died for our sins. We might emphasize that this is God's love in action for us. Our Epistle Lesson for today begins with that concept as it speaks to us of some of the specific blessings we enjoy because Christ Jesus suffered and died for us. Guided by the Spirit let's

Theme: Consider God's Saving Grace, In Grace ...

- 1) He has made us alive in Christ (vss. 4-7)
- 2) He gives us the gift of faith (vss. 8-9)
- 3) He provides ways for us to live our thanks (vs. 10)

Sometimes when we are parallel parked we have to back up so that we can go forward and drive out of our parking space. Sometimes when we are involved in a conversation with someone we might have to stop them and ask them to fill in some details for us so that we can understand what they are telling us. That's what we have to do if we are going to fully understand the words of our text. We're going to have to back up so we can move forward.

So let's back up to the opening verses of Ephesians chapter two – in those verses Paul reminds believers of their natural spiritual condition. It's an ugly picture – he describes us as being dead in transgressions and sins as we followed the ways of this world gratifying our sinful flesh and following its desires. Then Paul concludes: “like the rest we were by nature deserving of wrath.” (cf. Eph. 2:1-3)

Now we can move forward! With the word, “but” Paul shifts us from reverse into drive! He contrasts what we were with what we are because of God's great love for us. **But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5) made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.**

Three phrases jump out at us – “his great love”, “rich in mercy,” and “the incomparable riches of his grace.” Mercy and grace flow from God's great love – a love which isn't just words and feelings. God's love demonstrates itself in his actions. Consider what God did. In grace, he made you alive in Christ because of his mercy!

Sometimes we might struggle a bit to understand the difference between grace and mercy. Perhaps the following situation might help us to put things into perspective. A father asked his son to do something and the son looked at his father and refused to do what he was told. "I'm not going to do that," he said. The angry and confused father sent his son to his room and told him to wait for him. After a bit, the father went to his son's room – ready to discipline him for his disobedience. When the father entered the room his son looked up at him with tears in his eyes – he knew he had disobeyed and he deserved to be disciplined but he asked for mercy. He asked his father to give him something he didn't deserve – namely forgiveness. That's mercy not getting what you deserve. Then the Father went a step further – he took his son out for ice cream! He gave him something he didn't deserve. That's grace – getting what you don't deserve.

In mercy, God does not punish us for our sins. In grace, he gives us forgiveness and a new life. We have been rescued from sin and death by grace. In place of death we have been given life. In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that baptism joins us to Christ's death and resurrection. Paul builds on that thought in our text.

6) And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7) in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

Through faith, we are alive and have a place with Christ. Our life is evidence of the incomparable richness of God's grace and kindness. God's blessings are poured out on us abundantly even now as a reminder of the eternal blessings which await us in the life to come. In his kindness, God saw our need and gave us exactly what we needed. In grace, God has made us alive in Christ and in grace, he gives us the gift of faith.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9) not by works, so that no one can boast.

We are saved! Salvation and new life is ours right now. We don't to wait for it. We don't have to work for it. We have been saved through faith. Faith receives the blessings of God's grace that are offered to us. This faith is a gift from our gracious God.

Normally we receive gifts from someone who knows and loves us. It's not likely that a stranger would give us a gift without a reason. We don't earn a gift. We don't have to meet any expectations to receive a gift. Gifts are given freely by those who love us and want us to enjoy them. God knows us and wants us to enjoy his blessings so he gives us the gift of faith.

Our forgiveness, the new life of blessings from God which we are enjoying and the gift of faith which receives these blessings are freely given to us by God without any merit or worthiness on our part. That's what Paul emphasizes with the phrase **"not by works, so that no one can boast."**

God uses his word to call people to faith – to give them new spiritual life, to comfort and encourage them. Even the faith which believes these promises is a gift of God. There's no reason for us to boast about what we have or have not done – God's grace provides us our salvation.

But that does not mean that we can go through life doing our own thing and still be confident of heaven. Our text explains the reason for God's grace: **For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

In grace, God provides ways for us to live our thanks. In his grace, God gives us our life time to come to faith in him as our Savior God and to serve him with our lives. It's easy to fall into the thinking that since

salvation does not depend upon our works there's no reason to give glory to God with our lives. The Apostle Paul refutes that line of thinking by reminding us not to take advantage of the grace of God. He writes in (Romans 5:20; 6:1-5 NIV) **where sin increased, grace increased all the more ... What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? (2) By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? (3) Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (4) We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (5) For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.**

Paul also gives us this encouragement: **Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.** (Colossians 3:17 NIV)

In grace, God provides us with opportunities to live in thanks to him. These opportunities will vary from individual to individual depending on the situations and roles God has given us in our lives. One of the amazing things about the opportunities God give us to live in thanks to him is that our works of thanks don't have to be something spectacular or amazing. Paul gives us this encouragement: **Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.** (Colossians 3:17 NIV) Even our regular routine activities are avenues through which we can express our thanksgiving to God for the blessings of his Saving Grace.

We are God's handiwork our text says. That word often describes something artistic like a poem or handicraft project or some other work of art. As touching poem brings glory to the poet or a fine painting brings honor to the artist so our lives should bring honor and glory to God as we reflect the grace which he has given to us.

In Grace ...

- 1) He has made us alive in Christ (vss. 4-7)
- 2) He gives us the gift of faith (vss. 8-9)
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Amen.