Sermon on Ephesians 2: 4 – 10 – It’s All About Grace!

“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 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. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

One stood proudly up front. The other stood humbly in the back. One looked up to heaven. The other probably looked down to hell. One boasted about his sacrifices. The other was convinced of his sins. One told God how he should be happy to have someone like him on his team. The other realized how undeserving he was of even the crumbs of God’s grace. One said, “I thank you Lord that I’m not like those sinners.” The other said, “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner.” One went home hardened in his own work righteousness. The other went home justified before God. Which of the two most accurately describes you? Ever taken pride in the fact that you’re always in church and you even come to Bible class too? Ever taken pride in all you’ve done for the church over the years? Ever looked down on others who don’t or haven’t? Luke tells us that Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector to those “who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.” Don’t misunderstand me. Being faithful in worship and Bible class is a good thing. Faithfully serving the Lord is also a good thing. But not if these things are done hoping to earn righteousness in the eyes of God or look down on others in the process of doing them because Paul tells us in our text for today that, It’s All About Grace! I. Grace that made us alive in Christ. II. Grace that moves us to live for Christ.

Let me ask you a question. How were people in the Old Testament saved before Jesus came? If you’ve ever thought that they were saved by obeying the Ten Commandments, you’re wrong, but you’re not alone. Many people would probably answer the question that way. The Ephesian congregation consisted of both Jews and Gentiles. Jews who had lived their lives under God’s Law. The Civil Law that governed them as a nation. The Ceremonial Law that governed their worship. The Moral Law that governed their hearts. But God’s Law wasn’t given to show people how to get to heaven. God’s Law was given to make us conscious of sin, to show us our inability to keep it perfectly the way God demands, to lead us to look to Jesus who kept it perfectly for us and died for our sins against it. So, how were people in the Old Testament saved before Jesus came? The same way we are, by the grace of God through faith in Jesus. For them, it was looking forward to the Promised Savior yet to come. For us, it’s looking back to the Promised Savior who came to live, die, and rise again to forgive all of our sins and give us the gift of eternal life in heaven.

That’s right, I said gift. Paul writes, “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” I know this goes against the natural religion of mankind. The “I’ll try hard to live a good life hoping that God will be happy with me” way of thinking. Ever heard someone say, “if anyone deserves to be in heaven...” at a funeral? Ever heard someone say, “I haven’t been to church for years, but I still pray every day” as if a person’s “good work” of prayer keeps them in “good standing” with God. Ever heard someone say, “I’m a good person. I work hard to provide for my family and feel that God will be happy with that?” How many people believe that heaven has to be earned because there’s no such thing as a free lunch? We live in America, the land of the free, the home of the brave, where we can accomplish anything we put our minds to! We put a man on the moon! Surely we can put ourselves in heaven! But Paul tells us just how impossible this is when he writes, “we were dead in transgressions.” Transgressions are sometimes referred to as trespasses or sins. With his law, God draws a line in the sand and says don’t cross it. When we do, we find ourselves guilty of a transgression. How often haven’t we crossed the line with our sinful thoughts, words, and actions? God tells us that he is to have first place in our hearts and lives. But when other things in our lives and schedules become more important, we commit a transgression. God tells us to be kind and compassionate to people. But when we’re mean to people, we commit a transgression. God tells us to be content with what we have. But when we covet what others have, we commit a transgression. You see we don’t bring anything to the table when it comes to our salvation. In fact, our many transgressions make us deserving of God leaving us dead on the table doomed to spend an eternity in hell.

But notice how Paul says, “because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” Did you notice three beautiful words Paul uses in this one verse? Love. Mercy. Grace. The word that Paul uses for love is agape love. That self-sacrificing kind of love. That God so agaped the world that he gave his one and only Son kind of love. Love that answered the question, “how much do you love me Lord? This much...
as he stretched out his arms and died.” Mercy and grace have been described as two facets in the jewel of God’s love. Mercy has the idea of love for the unlovable, the miserable, the afflicted. It also carries an intense desire and ability to do something about it. Mercy says, “look at what you’ve gotten yourself into; I’m going to do what it takes to get you out.” Which brings us to grace. Grace also gives us a glimpse into the heart and mind of God. Grace describes a quality in God that made him willing and eager to save sinners like you and me. Grace is God’s underserved love for sinners like you and me. GRACE has sometimes been referred to as “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.” Grace says, “look at what you’ve gotten yourself into; look at what I’ve done to get you out. I sent my only Son to live, die, and rise again to forgive all of your sins and give you the gift of eternal life in heaven.”

God’s love, grace, and mercy are poured out on us richly and abundantly by the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament. Paul tells us that, “God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ.” It’s sometimes referred to as “quickening.” If you’re familiar with the words of the Apostles’ Creed from the TLH we confessed, “and he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead.” For my catechism kids, I sometimes use the illustration of those medical shows on television that show doctors frantically working on someone flatlined on the operating table. Taking those paddles and yelling clear as they shock a person to life. In a similar way, God takes the paddles of Word and Sacrament and shocks us to life, spiritual and eternal life. Those same paddles are what God uses to keep the spiritual rhythm of our hearts going, hence the importance of making use of them on a regular basis.

Because not only have we been saved from something, we’ve been saved for something. We’ve been saved from an eternity in hell and the wrath and punishment of God. We’ve been saved for an eternity in heaven and the privilege of serving God. In his explanation to the second article of the Apostles’ Creed, Martin Luther writes, “all this he did that I should be his own and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally.” Our Time of Grace is to be used to “seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.” Our Time of Grace is to be used to stay connected to Jesus and connect others to Jesus. Paul writes, “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Let’s get something straight. Good works do not produce Christians, but Christians produce good works. Good works are not done to gain heaven. Good works are done to say thank you to God for the gift of heaven. Maybe you saw the email some time ago that promoted our Men’s Breakfast Bible Study by asking two questions. Are good works necessary for salvation?

Are good works necessary for the Christian? Two different questions with two different answers. Are good works necessary for salvation? No, they are excluded. Are good works necessary for the Christian? Yes, they are expected. You see the God who has given us the gift of salvation has also given us gifts of time, talents, and treasures that are to be used to his glory. The God who has given us the gift of salvation also prepares and provides opportunities for us to say thank you. May God open our eyes to see and seize those opportunities! May God forgive us for the times we made excuses when God provided those opportunities!

Those opportunities might not always be grand or glorious or provide the kind of satisfaction we’re hoping for. Martin Luther once said that even the mother who changes her baby’s diaper is performing a beautiful act of service to God by serving the tiny soul entrusted to her care. She doesn’t do it hoping to be pampered in a special place in heaven. She does it out of love for her Savior because she realizes it’s all about grace. Her child brings nothing to the table. Her child must be brought to the table and changed and fed and cared for. That’s the way it is for the child of God. Brought to the font for baptism, nourished in God’s Word, confirmed in the faith, commanded at His table. God’s grace accomplishes all this. Dear friends, it’s all about grace! Don’t lose sight of grace. Lose sight of grace and you’re in danger of losing what is already yours by grace. Lose sight of grace and you’ll find yourself standing at the front of church with the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable. Lose sight of grace and you won’t go home justified in the eyes of God because you’ll be too busy trying to justify yourself. Lose sight of grace and you’ll start to think that there has to be a special spot in heaven for you because of who you are or all you’ve done! Lose sight of grace and you run the risk of losing a spot in heaven at all.

This Easter you’ll once again have opportunities to share the message of God’s grace with those around you. Think of how richly God has blessed you by grace and how you might bring these same blessings into the lives of others. Think of some people who could use a fresh look at God’s grace. They might live next door to you. They might even live under the same roof. Don’t dismiss these opportunities because they haven’t worked in the past. Begin by praising God that he’s never given up on you and may God’s grace lead you to never give up on those around you because you know that “It’s All About Grace!” Grace that made us alive in Christ. Grace that moves us to live for Christ.

Amen.