

Better Than the Lottery

I Know Who I Am

Ephesians 2:4-9

January 17, 2016

How many of you got caught up in Lottery Fever this past week? I'm not asking if you bought a ticket. Surely no United Methodist gambled on the Lottery. But how many paused from whatever you were doing and thought what you might do with half a gazillion bucks? What were you going to do if someone else – who bought a lottery ticket – gave it all to you? What would you have done with the money?

SOLICIT REPONSES

There were many people who were thinking that their lives would finally be good if they won. They would finally have happiness if they won the lottery. But we know as Christians that there is a different source for happiness and fulfillment and peace. There is something better than the lottery.

We are beginning this New Year talking about who we really are. During our series, "I Know Who I Am", we are studying the book of Ephesians and discovering, or rediscovering, who we are when we are followers of Christ.

Two weeks ago, we learned that we are blessed because we have been offered adoption into God's family. Yes, through Christ, we have become a Child of God. Last week, we learned that we have been redeemed through the blood of Christ.

I invite you to turn to the Book of Ephesians with me, chapter 2. This is one of Paul's letters he wrote while he was in prison for sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He wrote this wonderful letter to the people of his beloved church in Ephesus, which whom he had been their pastor for 3 years.

Let's look at Ephesians 2:4-9:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.¹

Now twice in these verses, Paul has referred to grace and being saved through it. Now, there are a wide range of meanings for grace:

- A well-coordinated athlete or dancer.
- Good manners and being considerate of others.
- Beautiful, well-chosen words.
- Consideration and care for other people.
- Various expressions of kindness and mercy.

To understand grace, we need to go back to an old Hebrew term that meant: "To bend, to stoop." In time came the idea of condescending favor. Donald Barnhouse said it best: Love that goes upward is worship. Love that goes outward is affection. Love that stoops is grace.

¹ Ephesians 2:4-9 (NRSV)

Chuck Swindol says that grace is to extend favor or kindness to one who doesn't deserve it and can never earn it.

An old Indian, after living many years in sin, was led to Christ by a missionary. Friends asked him to explain the change in his life. Reaching down, he picked up a little worm and placed it on a pile of leaves. Then, touching a match to the leaves, he watched them smolder and burst into flames. As the flames worked their way up to the center where the worm lay, the old chief suddenly plunged his hand into the center of the burning pile and snatched out the worm. Holding the worm gently in his hand, he gave this testimony to the grace of God: "Me. . .that worm!"

Justice is getting what we deserve. Mercy is not getting what we deserve. Grace is getting what we do not deserve.

The best definition of grace does not come from a dictionary, but from the pages of Jesus' life.

We see grace through the story of the women caught in adultery. According to the Law, she deserved to be stoned to death for her actions. Jesus could have carried out the sentence, but instead offered her grace.

Think about the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan took care of this complete stranger he found beaten and left half dead beside the road. That's grace.

What about the story of the Prodigal Son? He took his father's inheritance and disgraced himself and his father by making horrible life choices. Finally at his lowest, he realizes that even the lowest servant has it better in his father's house. So he goes back home, ready to say "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son."² But the father has been waiting and watching. And while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.³ He declared to everyone, "He was lost, but now he is found!"⁴ That's grace.

What happens to us when we truly understand grace?

First of all, we have a greater appreciation for God and his gifts.

We begin to get a better understanding of all that God does for us, and the longer we walk with Him, the more He reveals.

Colossians 3:9-10 reads,

*Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him.*⁵

The word "renewed" means "renovated."

Have you ever been involved in renovating something? Quite likely, problems of time and money will arise. You either run out of time or energy and never have enough money to finish.

Good thing about God is He never runs out of time or money. He will finish the renovation in your life if you will allow Him.

Another thing that happens to us when we truly understand grace is that we spend less time and energy being critical of others.

² Luke 15:21 (NLT)

³ Luke 15:20 (NLT)

⁴ Luke 15:32 (NLT)

⁵ Colossians 3:9-10 (NLT)

When you begin to operate in context of grace, you will become less judgmental. You will allow others to make their own decisions. After all: Can the hungry accuse the beggar? Can the sick mock the ill? Can the blind judge the deaf? Can the sinner condemn the sinner? No, only God can judge!

Third thing that happens to us when we truly understand grace is that we take a giant step in maturity.

Grace has a tendency to help you and I focus on God and His ways. It takes our eyes off other problems, whether they're your own or someone else's. New things begin to open up to you that maybe you've never seen before (that's the wonderful thing about grace).

Unfortunately, there is an enemy of grace, what I might call a grace killer. It is something that keeps us from receiving God's grace. Even though the Scripture tells us it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, there is a grace killer that can dominate our lives. And what is it?

Self-sufficiency. Please hear me. The Bible does not teach us to be lazy. 2 Thessalonians 3:10 reads:

Even while we were with you, we gave you this command: "Those unwilling to work will not get to eat."⁶

What I'm talking about is an attitude that you can do it all on your own without God. It's an emphasis on what we do for God instead of what God does for us.

An example of this is the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. The people wanted to build a tower whose top would reach into heaven itself. Living Bible calls this construction project "a proud eternal monument to themselves."⁷ Was God pleased with this? No, so he changed their language, and the project was not finished.

You might be thinking, "Oh, come on Pastor, self-sufficiency is not that bad!"

The danger of self-sufficiency is this: by exalting my own effort and striving for my own accomplishments, I insult God's grace and steal the credit that belongs to Him alone.

We see so much of this today, athlete claiming how wonderful he is, or actor, politician. But they could have done nothing without the grace of God.

How can a violin take credit for sounding so good or a car for running so smoothly? It can't.

John MacArthur says, "As far as the way of salvation is concerned, there are only two religions the world has ever known: the religion of divine accomplishment, which is biblical Christianity, and the religion of human achievement, which includes all other kinds of religion, by whatever names they may go under."

All other world religions approach God on a bartering system. They all fall under works, which is self-sufficiency.

Let's pretend you could work your way to heaven. Imagine the pride and arrogance, why would we even need to thank God after all we've accomplished this. "It was by my blood, sweat, and tears."

Let me ask you: Do you thank your boss for giving you your paycheck? No. Why not? Because you earned it, he owes you.

⁶ 2 Thessalonians 3:10 (NLT)

⁷ Genesis 11:3 (TLB)

Do you see how contradictory this is, but yet many of us think like this. For example:

“I can’t go to church because I’m not good enough.”

“I can’t pray because I’m not good enough.”

“I can’t be saved because I’m not good enough.”

I always wondered how good was good enough.

Paul says,

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁸

You can’t earn your way to heaven, no matter how hard you try. The thief who died on the cross next to Jesus understood this. There was no way he could work his way to heaven because he was about to die, but Jesus said, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”⁹

Folks, don’t pollute the Gospel with anything, even if it looks good. It’s grace we’ve been saved by and nothing else. If you try to add something, you pollute it and make it no good.

I know this can be hard to understand and grasp. Let me illustrate it this way.

Let’s imagine you have a six-year-old son whom you love dearly. Tragically, one day you discover that your son was horribly murdered. After a lengthy search the investigators of the crime find the killer. You have a choice. If you used every means in your power to kill the murderer for his crime, that would be vengeance. If, however, you’re content to sit back and let the legal authorities take over and execute on him what is proper – a fair trial, a plea of guilty, capital punishment – that is justice. But if you should plead for the pardon of the murderer, forgive him completely, invite him into your home, and adopt him as your own son; that is grace. There are very few people who would do that, but that’s what God does every day.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—¹⁰

Grace is free to us, but let us never forget – it cost our Lord everything. Grace is God’s riches at Christ’s expense.

There once was a Religion Professor named Dr. Christianson who taught a required survey of Christianity course at small college. Every freshman was required to take the course regardless of his or her major. Although he tried hard to communicate the gospel, students viewed the class as nothing more than a waste of time.

One particular year Dr. Christianson had a student named Steve. Steve was the Center for the college football team and also a strong Christian who intended on going to Seminary. One day Dr. Christianson had an idea and he asked Steve to stay after class. “How many pushups can you do?” He asked. Steve said, “I do 200 every night.” The professor asked Steve if he could do 300. “I have never done 300 before,” Steve said, “but I think I can do it.” “Good,” the professor said, and he proceeded to tell his plan to Steve.

Friday came and Steve got to class early. The professor came in with a large box of fluffy, cream filled doughnuts. The class was excited, it was Friday the last class of

⁸ Ephesians 2:8 (NRSV)

⁹ Luke 23:43 (NRSV)

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:8 (NRSV)

the day, and they could start their weekend early. Dr. Christianson went to the first girl in the row and asked, "Cynthia would you like a donut?" "Yes," she said. Dr. Christianson then turned to Steve and asked, "Steve would you do ten push-ups so that Cynthia can have a donut?" "Sure." Steve jumped down out of his desk and counted off ten pushups. Dr. Christianson laid the donut on Cynthia's desk.

Joe was next. He asked Joe the same question and Joe said "yes." Steve did 10 more pushups and the professor laid the doughnut on Joe's desk. And so it went all the way down the first row and half way down the second until it came to Scott. He was a basketball player and friendly to female companionship. Scott replied to the professor's question by saying, "I want the doughnut if I can do my own pushups." Dr. Christianson said, "No Steve has to do the pushups." Then Scott said, "Well I don't want one if I can't do my own." Dr. Christian turned around and asked, "Steve, would you do ten pushups so Scott can have a donut he doesn't want." Scott said, "Hey! I said I didn't want one!" Dr. Christianson said, "Look, this is my classroom, my class, my desks, and these are my donuts, Just leave it on the desk if you don't want it." And he put the donut on Scott's desk.

Steve had begun to slow down a little and sweat had begun to form on his cheeks. Dr. Christianson started down the third row. Students were beginning to get a little angry. Dr. Christianson asked Jenny, "Jenny, do you want a donut?" Sternly, Jenny said, "NO!" Then Dr. Christianson asked, "Steve, would you do ten more pushups so Jenny can have a donut that she doesn't want?" Steve did ten; Jenny got a doughnut.

By now a sense of uneasiness had filled the room. The students were all beginning to say "no." There were uneaten donuts on every desk. Steve was now putting forth a lot of extra effort to get the pushups done for each doughnut. A small pool of sweat was on the floor, his face was red, and you could see the sweat soaking through his shirt.

Dr. Christianson asked Robert, the most vocal unbeliever in class, to watch to make sure Steve did the full ten.

Dr. Christianson started down the forth row. Students from other classes had come in and were sitting along the side of the room watching on. When the professor saw them he counted and saw that there were now 34 people in the room. He was worried about Steve, "Could he do that many pushups?" Jason, a recent transfer student, didn't know what was going on and came in to see. The class yelled, "Go away! Don't come in!" Steve picked up his head and said, "Let him come in." Jason was asked and he said "yes." "Steve will you do ten pushups so Jason can have a donut?" Steve did ten pushups very slowly and with great struggle. Jason, confused, was handed a donut and he sat down.

Dr. Christianson then finished the fourth row and began on the visitors. Steve's arms were shaking uncontrollably with each push up. By this time sweat was pouring off of his face and arms. The very last two students were cheerleaders. "Linda, do you want a donut?" Linda cried and said, "No thank you." Professor turned to Steve, "Steve would you do ten pushups so Linda can have a donut she doesn't want?" Grunting from the effort, Steve did ten very slow pushups for Linda.

The last girl was Susan. "Susan would you like a donut?" Susan was full of tears and did not answer. "Steve would you do ten pushups so Susan can have a donut?" Susan asked, "Dr. Christianson why can't I help him?" Dr. Christianson had tears in his

eyes also and replied, "I have given him this task and he is in charge of seeing that everyone has an opportunity for a donut whether they want it or not. When I decided to have a party I looked at the grade book and found that Steve was the only person with a perfect grade. All of you had failed a test, skipped class, or turned in inferior work. Steve told me that in football practice, when a player messes up he must do pushups. I told Steve that none of you could come to my party unless he paid the price by doing your pushups. He and I made a deal for your sakes."

Steve slowly got up off the floor, he had done 350 pushups, his arms buckled beneath him as he started to get up. Two students helped Steve up off the floor and to a seat, physically exhausted, but wearing a thin smile. "Well done good and faithful servant", said the professor, "not all sermons are preached in words class."

Turning the students the professor said, "My wish is that you may fully comprehend all the riches of grace and mercy that have been given to you through the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God did not spare His only Son but gave him up for all of us. Whether or not we accept His gift is our choice. The price has been paid. Wouldn't you be foolish and ungrateful to leave it lying on the desk?"