

**“Grace Happens”**  
**Ephesians 2:1-10**  
**Pastor Gary Walters**

“In the past you were dead because you sinned and fought against God. You followed the ways of this world and obeyed the devil. He rules the world and his spirit has power over everyone who doesn't obey God. Once we were also ruled by the selfish desires of our bodies and minds. We had made God angry and we were going to be punished like everyone else. But God was merciful. We were dead because of our sins but God loved us so much that he made us alive with Christ and God's wonderful kindness is what saves you. God raised us from death to life with Christ Jesus and he has given us a place beside Christ in Heaven. God did this so that in the future world he could show how truly good and kind he is to us because of what Christ Jesus has done. You were saved by faith in God who treats us much better than we deserve. This is God's gift to you and not anything that you have done on your own. It isn't something that you have earned so that there is nothing you can brag about. But God has planned for us to do good things and to live as he always wanted us to live. That is why he sent Christ, to make us what we are.” The word of God, for the people of God, thanks be to God.

Let me start with a story about the motto my senior class chose, when I was in high school. The adviser and a group of students, picked a motto. I'm not sure how they came up with a motto, but it was typical—long, corny and boring and we thought it was...well stupid. So, a group came up with the unofficial alternate motto. It appears on bumper stickers sometimes and the short version of it is "It happens." Although, when we put it on our bumpers, oddly enough the principal sent us out to the parking lot to scrape them off. The version we used is inappropriate for polite conversation. "It happens". But, in today's lesson, Paul paints this amazing picture, instead of "It happens" I would say, "Grace happens."

Paul paints a picture of this grace-filled world we live in. He doesn't start there, but that's where he ends up. He uses two words; to describe this world. They jump out at us from almost every verse. These words, mercy and grace go hand in hand. They are central to what Paul is saying. Mercy is not receiving what we do deserve. In this case, mercy is not receiving the punishment that we deserve from God. Grace is just the opposite. Grace is receiving what we do not deserve. In other words, it's receiving from God the good things that in fact we do not deserve. Paul sets the stage for God's mercy and grace by describing the human condition and the effects of sin upon humanity. He describes it in three stages.

First, he talks about sin as separating us from God and separating us from others. We don't need to go into detail about the fractured and divided world that we live in. I've heard it said that sin is the one empirically verifiable Christian doctrine. There's not a lot of argument as to whether sin is a reality in the world we live in. Sin separates us both from God and then from one another.

But, sin also leaves its mark, or seal, upon us, so that we stand guilty. It's like a wet blanket that is thrown over us or a dark cloud that we bear the weight of, carting it with us wherever we go. In the eyes of God, we are guilty (in the legal sense), as if we stood in the courtroom and the jury has pronounced its verdict.

But there is more, sin also destroys the human will. We may choose to sin in the beginning because it's something we want or desire but in the end we sin because we can't help but sin. It becomes a habit and the habit becomes close to a necessity and we are no longer the master, but that sin has mastery over us.

We are no longer in control but we are at the mercy of our desires, at the mercy of our vices. We are in trouble.

That is a dark picture. But, thank God, that's not the last word because in comes mercy and grace. John Wesley picked up on this idea from scripture and it became a hallmark of his teaching—this three fold way that grace comes to us. Three effects of grace countering three consequences of sin. There is a grace that comes before salvation, there is a grace that touches us at the moment of salvation and there is a grace that comes after salvation. Paul talks about that progression here in this passage. I want to talk about those for a moment too.

John Wesley's word for the grace that comes before salvation is prevenient grace. You don't have to remember that, but since we are good Methodists, I'm going to tell it to you....just because. It's one of those words that is worth remembering, or at least remember the idea. That there is a grace of God that comes to us before we are saved. Without that grace we would not even be able to decide or choose to come to God at all. Prevenient grace helps restore to us our will so that we can say yes to God. But, that grace also entices us and draws us ever closer to God. It is God laying the groundwork, setting the scene, preparing the moment so that we will say yes to him. Much like a young man might prepare for a date with candles and flowers, a nice meal and maybe some romantic music going in the background, so that the scene is set for when he gets together with the desire of his affection. God graces us like that.

Let me give you an example from my own experience. I can trace prevenient grace way, way back in my family tree. My grandmother's great grandfather, (we're talking 1805) was a circuit rider under Jacob Albright. In fact he was converted under Jacob Albright's ministry. Albright was the founder of the Evangelical Association. Very similar to the Methodists in practice and theology, they worked among the German-speaking settlers in the Americas. Jacob recruited others to help him and they went out on circuits, a series of churches that they would visit. My grandmother's great grandfather was converted at a worship service in New Berlin, a small town in Pennsylvania. The Evangelical Association was coming along, but as revival spread and started to have an effect on these communities, opposition arose as well. Particularly among the pub owners and brewers hostility ran high, so they rallied the town leaders against the Evangelical Association (at least they did so in New Berlin). So that the town fathers, which had previously let the Evangelical Association meet in their school house chained the doors against them. When Jacob Albright arrived in town that night for the meeting, a group of town fathers met and said, "You are not welcome here and you cannot use our schoolhouse." Albright was not deterred. In fact, he wasn't impressed at all. It being a nice evening, he just climbed up on the steps of the school house and started preaching right then under the stars. And he preached! He got fired up and at a high pitch in his sermon he said, "God has opened for himself a door in New Berlin, and He will build up His work here in spite of the opposition of hell and wicked men!" At this instant a small explosion inside the schoolhouse, blew out the windows and knocked open the door. The gathering went in and finished their worship.

Now I don't know if that's the stuff of folklore, but it's a great story and we do know for sure that within a couple of years New Berlin become the headquarters for the Evangelical Association, so effective was their ministry in turning around that hostility that had arisen. Well, the Evangelical Association merged with the United Brethren which became the Evangelical United Brethren which joined with the Methodist Episcopal Church to become the United Methodist Church and that's my Grandmother's heritage.

Now, jump forward to about 1976, I was about Andrew's age, and my family lived in Rapid City. My grandparents lived just south of Huron, South Dakota. Being the youngest I was usually stuck back with the luggage, which wasn't all bad, I could stretch out and sleep, easily since my parents usually traveled at night. I thought it was because the air conditioning didn't work very well, but now that I have kids of my own I suspect it was so we slept instead of having four fighting kids in the backseat. Anyway, I got dumped in the back with the luggage and a blanket and I fell asleep as we were leaving Rapid City, so I had a great night's rest and was carried up to the bunk bed at my grandparent's house during the night. I woke up bright and early and thought, "We're at Grandma and Grandpa's!" and so I hopped out of bed and pattered down the stairs and walking into the kitchen, instantly aware that I was stepping into a holy moment.

There my grandparents were, steaming cups of coffee between them, my Grandpa's Bible and "The Upper Room" open between them. They had just finished their devotions and were holding hands praying. That was the first time I can remember anyone praying for me by name. They prayed for me, they prayed for my brothers and my sister, they prayed for my cousins, my aunts, my uncles. I thought "Wow, they're praying for me."

Well, now, jump forward to when Laura and I were in seminary. It was Easter Break, though they called it reading week, as there was plenty of that to catch up on. Rather than making the 22 hour journey back to Cheyenne or Rapid City, we went to Arkansas where my grandparents had retired to. That was a mere 10 hour drive. Getting up in the morning, there were my grandparents, with my Grandpa's Bible between them, held together by rubber bands, and their "Upper Room" and their steaming mugs of coffee and they invited Laura and I to do devotions with them and then they prayed. And they prayed for my aunts and my uncles and my brothers and my sister and for Laura and I and Nicholas, who at that time was in vitro, and all those other grandchildren and great grandchildren that were on the way. That's prevenient grace. My grandparents praying for me, for years and years when I wasn't even a Christian, when there was no sign their prayer was making any difference, but that kind of heritage, that kind of spiritual focus and power and their prayer, is responsible in no small part for my being here today, doing what I am doing. Among my cousins, aunts and uncles it is easy to see their influence. They were the hand of God drawing me to himself.

I hope, I expect, that you can think of examples like that in your life of prevenient grace... But that is not where it ends. Because God's grace draws us to himself for a reason, so that he can invite us into a relationship, where we experience God's justifying grace. Its a legal term, describing the work of Christ on the cross. Before this moment we stood condemned, but now, by God's justifying grace are accepted. When we come to that point where we accept God's grace, he wipes the slate clean. It's receiving a presidential pardon. There is no record of that wrongdoing and nothing we can do to earn it. It is simply a gift that God gives to us. For us, that gift is free. We cannot earn it, we can only accept it. Now for God it was very expensive, very costly, because it cost him the life of his son, Jesus Christ. But, for us, it's free.

Grace draws us to God and gives us the power to accept his grace. Grace then sets us right before God. All this brings us to the work of God's grace which come after our salvation, because that is not the end, but the beginning. I am going to give you another word that John Wesley used, sanctifying grace. Paul phrases it well in the very last verse of the passage we read, "That is why God sent Christ, to make us what we are." I like that phrase—"to make us what we are." God using his grace to craft in us his image, that image we were created in, that we were meant to bear and to live out, so that more and

more we grow into that family resemblance shared by the children of God.

It reminds me of a story set at the turn of the previous century. In a city on a cold, stormy, November day. The sleet was pounding and the wind was blowing and there was a little boy standing out there in the weather, threadbare clothes, holes in his boots and a coat too thin for the day. He was selling newspapers. But, a woman who was dressed well against the weather walked by and took notice. She thought, "There is no way this boy can stand here for the rest of the winter trying to sell newspapers dressed like that." So, she asked the boy if he could put his papers away for a little bit, that she might take him into the department store, there on the corner. They went into the store and she bought him a coat and a hat and new boots and gloves. As they were leaving the store, the boy couldn't express his thanks enough. Over and over again said he said, "Thank you, you don't know how much this means to me." Then as they reached the door he looked up at her and asked, "Miss, are you God's mother?" She just smiled at him and said, "No, I'm just one of his children." He responded, "Ahhh, I knew you were related." That's sanctifying grace, living out the image of God that we were created to carry in the first place.

Really it's all one grace but it affects us in three distinct ways. It's God's grace meeting us at our point of greatest need. God's grace always rushes to that place where we need it most. That grace coming to draw us closer, to restore the broken relationship, and give us the power to live as we ought, crafting us into the image of God. So my question or my challenge this morning is this: "Have you experienced God's grace in its fullness, in each of these three ways?" I'm assuming, or guessing, that you've experienced it at least in a couple of those ways because you're here. That at some time or somewhere God put the right people or the right circumstances in your path to draw you closer to himself. Now he sets his grace ever before us, crafting us into his image. Do you experience God's grace in that fullness? Because, grace happens and it happens again and again and again. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Lord we thank you for your grace. Now open us up, our hearts and our minds to you, that we might experience your grace in all of its fullness, that we may indeed be that which we were made to be, your children. In Christ's name we pray, Amen!