**Ephesians 2:1,4-10** October 15, 2017

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 *Ephesians2:1As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins… 4But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—9not by works, so that no one can boast. 10For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**GRACE ALONE – SOLA GRATIA**

**I. Underappreciated Grace**

 Someone once asked a biologist, “What is the scientific definition of a weed?” The question asker was thinking that there is something in certain kinds of plants that makes them weeds—something a scientist could define, and that we would all hear and say, “Ah, so that’s what it is!” “What is a weed?” the biologist repeated. “A weed is any plant that… is growing where you don’t want it to grow.” Hmmm. Makes sense, but kind of disappointing. A weed is just an unappreciated plant.

 I don’t watch much TV, but when I do, one of the things that really bothers me is advertisements for prescription medications. I could give you several reasons. They tend to be rather boring commercials. And I definitely don’t like hearing about all sorts of icky things while I am eating pizza in front of the game. Those, however, aren’t the main reason. The real reason I don’t like medication commercials during my TV show comes down to this: I have been blessed with reasonably good health. Those medications would make zero difference in my life. Those medications may be blessings in other people’s lives, but for now I have no appreciate for those commercials.

 This is one of the problems with the greatest blessing in the world: God’s grace. It isn’t appreciated. The entire Bible is basically about God’s grace. And if you are wondering what grace is, this is a nice hook to hang it on: “Grace” is God’s undeserved love.

 However, like plants growing in the wrong place and medication advertisements to healthy people, God’s grace is not appreciated by many. But here is the difference: every single person who has walked the earth, other than our Lord Jesus himself, has a crying need for God’s underappreciated grace. It’s not that people don’t need God’s grace. They just *think* they don’t need it.

**II. We Need Grace Because We Are Spiritually Dead**

 Verse one tells us, ***“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”*** “Dead” it said. That means that when you lift up the arm, it flops back to the table. Dead means there is not a trickle of blood, not the faintest breath. It means: not able to run a marathon, not able to blink an eye. Our reading tells us that we are spiritually dead from the beginning, unable to do anything pleasing to God from birth. We need God’s grace, his undeserved love, because we are powerless to save ourselves.

 If we are really in that much trouble, then why don’t people appreciate God’s grace? The popular view is that people don’t have a sin problem. And if you don’t think you have a sin problem, then you don’t think you need grace.

 It is strange that most people don’t think they have a sin problem. Most of these same people are concerned about all the bad things in the world out there: disasters, violence, abuse and exploitation of other people, criminal acts and hateful looks are all signs that we are a fallen race in a fallen world. There is something wrong with us. And it is sin.

 In spite of all that the world says. “No! People are good.”

 Jesus didn’t think so. Find me the Bible passage where Jesus says that people are good. Here is a Bible passage that comes to my mind: *“Jesus answered. No one is good—except God alone”* (Mark 10:18).

 Do we need grace? In another place Jesus said, *“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”* Do understand what Jesus implies? He says that in our natural born state, God will not allow us into his presence (John 3:3-6).

 Do we need grace? Think of the Gospel reading. That “sinful” woman came to Jesus and anointed his feet. Oh, it is a beautiful story. Jesus was so gracious toward her. But here we learn the meaning of the word grace. Did you hear Jesus call her a sinner, a great sinner. He said that in verse 47. He said she *needed* grace, God’s undeserved love, because she was such a sinner. Jesus did not try to paint over her sinful life. He did not say, “It didn’t really matter.” He did not say, “Well, you kind of made up for the bad things you did.” He did not say, “Well, you are basically a good person trying to do the right thing.” God’s grace is not for good people. It is only for sinners, for wicked people. But the beauty of grace is that though she was a sinner, Jesus said to her, *“Your sins are forgiven... Go in peace.”* He who will judge all the living and the dead one day, he proclaimed her sins forgiven in God’s grace.

 Do we need grace? The Old Testament reading provided a rich picture of grace. In that reading the prophet Zechariah saw a vision of Israel’s high priest, a man named Joshua (not the Joshua of *And the Walls Came a Tumblin’ Down*—same name, different man). In the vision Satan was speaking to God about the high priest Joshua. Now this Joshua was not like the high priests we know from Jesus’ life. This Joshua was a godly man. Yet Satan is accusing him, “God, you can’t accept this man. Look at all his sins. He may be your high priest, but he is a sinner. You said that those who sin cannot be in heaven. You said that sin needs to be punished. You said…” Satan was accusing Joshua, and it was all true. He was a sinner like us. Joshua couldn’t say anything. But the Lord said to Satan, *“Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?”* Then he turned to Joshua and said, *“I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.”* God never denied his high priest’s sin. He never said it didn’t matter. It did! But by grace he said, *“I have taken away your sin.”*

 I use so many Bible passages to make this point because all the world says just the opposite—in spite of all the evidence both inside and outside the Bible. Even a great number of Christians say that people are basically good. (Which might be true when we measure with a human measure, but not with God’s measure.) This is the reason the Bible’s message of “grace” is so underappreciated by nearly all the world. This is why the message of Jesus our Savior is so uninteresting to the world around us. Because the world has believed Satan’s lie that we don’t have a sin problem.

 Yet we do have a sin problem. Have you wasted your God-given time when you should have been getting work done, helping other people? Have you ever shaved the truth, just a bit, so that you would stay out of trouble? Have you ever grumbled at the thought of giving ½ of your Sunday to God? Have you ever regretted writing that check you put in the offering envelope? Or maybe you are quite content to give nothing or next to nothing in thanksgiving to God. Do you give your time to God, to his church, to its programs, or is it all about you, your career, your kids, your time off, your retirement? And if you generally do most of these things, do you start to feel proud about it? To grumble about others who don’t pull their weight? One hymn talks about God’s grace this way: “I Need Thee Ev’ry Hour.” Maybe it should say, “I Need Thee Ev’ry Second.” God’s grace, his forgiveness, isn’t the sort of thing that we need at a few key moments in life. We need it all the time.

**III. God’s Amazing Grace**

 It was our lostness and God’s love for us that caused God to be merciful, gracious. Verses 4 and 5 tell us, ***“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”*** (4-5).

 So let’s imagine what grace might look like.

 Is this what grace looks like? A seven-year old girl gets a birthday present: a certificate saying she can go to the pound to pick out a pet puppy. She will adopt that once neglected puppy and make it her own for life. Is that grace? Understandably, the girl wants just the right puppy. She is thinking of a puppy with a good personality, must be cute, the right breed that will grow up to the right size. So she picks out just the right puppy that pleases her and they live happily ever after. Is that a good picture of grace? No. It’s a good thing, but it is not a good picture of grace.

 Grace is more like a man who drives up to a pound and says without stepping around the counter to the cages in back, “I want all of the dogs you have.” “But sir, you don’t know what you are getting in to.” “Yes, I do. I want them all.” “But sir, some of the dogs really aren’t that nice. Some will bite you, others are just plain mean.” “I want them all.” “But sir, some of the dogs just arrived today and might still have fleas. You don’t want them.” “I want them, too.” “Well, there are a lot of dogs. It will cost a lot of money to take care of them.” “Money is no object.” “Sir, some of them really don’t look all that nice; some have been known to eat slippers, others have meds that you have to give them every day. You really don’t want all that bother.” “I know. I know. I want them all. Even the naughty ones, even the ones with health issues, even the one that has three legs, even the meanest one in the pound. It doesn’t matter.” That is a little closer to grace. Grace isn’t cute. Grace is awesome. It makes us stand up and take notice.

 It makes us take notice because grace means that Jesus had to humble himself and enter into this world because of our sins. (That should tell us how big a deal sin is to God.) First of all, Jesus had to enter the world and do our job for us – the job of keeping God’s law. Then he had to die for us –the job of paying the penalty our sins demanded in God’s law code. That is grace. Grace becomes valuable when we get to the most despairing moments of life, when we become aware of how badly we need it.

 God’s grace is for those times when we want to kick ourselves for losing our temper. It is for those times when we feel like a failure because we made choices that have let other people down. God’s grace is for when we feel shame before God because we were afraid to acknowledge Jesus before our co-workers. In his grace, Jesus looks at us gently and tenderly and says—he doesn’t say, “It’s ok;” he never says that about sin—Jesus says to us as he did to that woman, *“Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.”* The guilt is gone.

 Grace Alone is a hall-mark of the Lutheran Reformation because 500 years ago the Christian church had abandoned the idea of God’s grace. It said that forgiveness could be gained if you made up for sin through acts called penance. It said that you could buy forgiveness with officially certified papers called indulgences. It said that after death you would have to suffer for your sins in a place called purgatory. All of those were false teachings which denied these life-giving, freedom-instilling words: ***“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.”***

 That is grace. May you always appreciate it as much as we sing in that one Lenten hymn: “Love so amazing, so divine; demands my soul, my life, my all.” (*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, v.3) Amen.