

God's Amazing Grace **Romans 3:21-26**

First, thanks to choir for their beautiful music on Easter, and for that wonderful rendition of Amazing Grace...

One of best loved hymns in church but people outside church also know it...

Funerals, especially fallen officers, bagpipes, etc.

Can also be sung to other tunes – Gilligan's Island (youth retreats),
House of the Rising Sun, tell of singing it in previous church

We sing about Amazing Grace but do we really know what it is? This morning we're going to talk about God's amazing grace.

But first, I'd like for you to complete these common American phrases:

If it sounds too good to be true... (it usually is)

We make money the old fashioned way, we... (earn it)

There's no such thing as a free... (lunch)

There's no gain without... (pain)

God helps those who... (help themselves)

Everything we learn growing up in our culture teaches us that you get what you deserve in life -- that you earn it. In America we value performance, we value effort, we value sweat, we value competition, we value winning, we value work. It's called the American work ethic. You get what you deserve in life.

Now there's a problem with that because that attitude makes it difficult to get to know God; because God doesn't operate on those principles. God operates on a totally different principle called grace. Let's take a look at Psalm 145:8: **"The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love."** It is God's nature to be gracious. The Bible tells us that is who God is – he is a gracious God. And it is his nature to bless people who don't deserve it. Aren't you glad about that? He blesses people who don't deserve it.

You just can't understand the Christian life – at all – until you understand grace. It is at the heart of our relationship with God – it's at the heart of our relationship with Jesus Christ. And the more you understand grace, the closer you're going to be drawn to God. The more you understand grace, the more you're going to love God, the more you're going to be grateful to God.

Now what is grace? Well, grace is so great and so wide that no single definition will encompass it. It's like a multi-faceted diamond. There are many different ways to look at it. Some people have said that **grace is God's love in action**. Some people have said that **grace is God giving me what I need and not what I deserve**. One definition I like is **that Grace is the face that God wears when he looks at my failures**.

Now don't get grace confused with mercy. Mercy is when God doesn't give us what we do deserve. Grace is when God does give us what we don't deserve. Mercy forgives us for what we've done. Grace gives us an abundance of blessings in spite of what we've done. Now I know that many of you think, "I've been a Christian for many years and I understand grace." But you know what, I don't

think most Christians really understand grace, because if they did they'd be living their lives differently. Most Christians will say "I'm saved by grace" but they continue to act as if God is sitting up there with a scorecard keeping score of their sins. They continue to act as if God is looking over their report card, saying, "Ok, you got an A, well, but couldn't you get all A pluses?" As if it's never good enough. Some of you are continuing to try to please God by working for it, by earning it, by saying, "I'm gonna show God that I'm a good guy." It stresses you out because you don't understand grace.

Now there are some of you who have already heard about grace, but there are many more who just don't understand it – because it's a message that seems to be "too good to be true." It's a message that runs so counter to our culture that we need to be constantly reminded of how God really deals with us humans.

This morning I want to share with you five aspects of grace – and I've arranged it in a little acrostic G-R-A-C-E as you can see in the bulletin insert. By the way, I'm indebted to Pastor Rick Warren for his insights on grace. Using this acrostic reminds me of a story of a professor who was speaking at Yale University on what Yale students were like and he said he was going to use the acrostic Y-A-L-E. And he went for an hour and a half. I think Y was for youth, A was for adventure, L was loyalty, E was for enthusiasm. After it was all over he asked one of the students what did you think of my speech and the guy said, "I'm just glad I didn't go to Massachusetts Institute of Technology." So, I promise you this acrostic won't be that long.

What in the world is grace? Let's start with **G – God's Gift to me**. In Romans 3:24 Paul says, *"All of us need to be made right with God. By his grace which is a free gift through Jesus Christ."* Now you know, because of this American work ethic that I was just talking about, most of us transfer that onto their relationship with God. If you were to go down to the mall and ask fifty or a hundred people "How do you get to heaven?" you'd hear a lot of different answers, but most of them would end up basically saying these kinds of things: "Well, just work really hard and try to do your best." That'll get you into heaven. Or, "Be good to other people, and be moral." Or, "Always make sure you do more good things in life than bad things, and if when you die your good pile is higher than your bad pile, you'll get into heaven." It's that old American work ethic again. But God says, like Paul says in this verse, that salvation is absolutely free. It's a gift. God says you can't earn it, you can't learn it, you can't buy it, you can't work for it – there's nothing you can do that will earn your way into heaven.

Now listen to this. **This is the fundamental difference between Christianity and every other world religion.** And it's the difference between grace and works. No other faith teaches that God just gives you salvation freely. Every other religion says – here is the system for how you earn God's approval, and if you will do these things God will give you a passing grade and let you in. And it may involve ritual, regulations, penance, fasting, etc.. I read a magazine article about a guy who was converting to Hinduism and how he pulled a cart by ropes fastened with hooks in his back, and he pulled it like a thousand miles in order to earn his way into the Hindu faith and I'm thinking "thank God I'm not a Hindu." You see, every other faith, every other religion can be summarized with one word – DO! Here's what you need to do to be approved by God. But the Bible says that the word is not DO but DONE! It was done by Jesus Christ – on the cross 2000 years ago. That's why on the cross Jesus cried out "It is finished! I've done it. I've paid the price for salvation for the entire world." He didn't say, "I am finished" because he wasn't. He said, "It is finished." What? Salvation. The way you get into heaven. It's been paid for, it's been done,

it's over! So you see, I'm not going to heaven because of what I've done but because of what was done for me. And I'll tell you, that is the greatest gift you'll ever be offered. It's priceless.

R – Received by Faith. God's grace is received by faith. Faith is the key that unlocks heaven. Ephesians 2:8-9 says this: *“For it is by grace that 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.”* What this is saying is that your ticket into heaven is a free gift. How can you brag about something that's just given to you. You didn't earn it. It's a gift. All you can do is accept it, and be grateful for it. So what this says is that my salvation is not based on my performance, it's based on God's promise; I'm not getting to heaven on my merit, I'm getting to heaven on God's mercy; I'm not getting to heaven on my goodness, I'm getting into heaven on God's grace.

God's grace is so unexpected – in fact, sometimes the exact opposite of what we would expect -- that when we experience it, it can radically change our lives. In Victor Hugo's novel “Les Miserables” Jean Valjean is a French prisoner sentenced to 19 years hard labor for stealing bread. When he is finally released he finds that no one will take in an ex-con until finally one night a kindly bishop has mercy on him. Waiting for the bishop and his daughter to fall asleep Valjean rummages through the house and creeps off into the darkness. At daybreak the police knock on the bishop's door with Valjean in hand. They had caught the convict in flight with the stolen silver and were ready to take him to prison. But the bishop responded in a most surprising way. “So here you are,” he cried out to Valjean. I'm delighted to see you again. Had you forgotten that I had given you the candlesticks as well? They're silver like the rest and easily worth 200 francs. Did you forget to take them?” Jean Valjean's eyes widened as he stared at the old man with an expression no words could convey. After the police left, the bishop handed the candlesticks to Valjean saying, “Do not forget, do not ever forget, that you have promised me to use the money to make yourself an honest man.” That encounter with grace changed Valjean's life forever.

That's what grace can do. And it is received by faith.

The letter A is for -- it's Available to all. God doesn't play favorites. It doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't matter what you've done, it doesn't matter how far you've strayed or how low you've sunk, God's grace is available to you. Romans 4:16 tells us that grace is not just for those who have lived under the law of Moses, it is for anyone who receives it by faith. Romans 10:13 says *“Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”* It doesn't matter who you are – everyone, it says, who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. It doesn't say you have to have a college degree, it doesn't say you have to be good, it doesn't mean that you've never had any problems in your life, it just says anybody, everybody, who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

Now the sad thing is that even though God has a gift for you, even though you don't have to pay for it, all you have to do is accept it in faith, and its available to everybody, the sad thing is many people reject it. Because they think they can get into heaven by earning their way.

All the trophies in heaven, all your good works, not one of them will help you get into heaven. Even Mother Teresa, with all the wonderful things she did, got into heaven only because of God's grace. And that brings us to the letter 'C.'

The letter 'C' stands for – it Comes through Christ. Grace comes through Christ. John 1:17 says, *“The Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”* Now why does salvation come through Christ? Why not anybody else? Why not Buddha, or

Muhammed? Why does the Bible say Christ? Because he's the one who paid for it. Nobody else paid for it. On the cross he paid for my sins, he paid for your sins, and so we come through Christ. You see the law tells me where I get off track but grace tells me how to get back on track. Romans 5:15 ***"Many people have received God's gift of life by the grace of one man, Jesus Christ."*** Or listen to Paul when he says in Galatians 2:21, ***"Don't treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if we could be saved by keeping the law then there was no need for Christ to die."***

There's another acrostic that helps us remember the meaning of grace: **"God's Riches At Christ's Expense."** Grace is free, salvation is free, but it's not cheap – somebody had to pay for it. And that someone was the only one who could pay for it – the Son of God, Jesus Christ. That's why grace comes only through Christ.

The E in grace is that God's grace is Extended through Eternity. Romans 6:23 says, ***"The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord."*** This is a good news/bad news verse. The bad news is that the wages of sin is death – you get what you paid for there. I break man's laws I have to pay man's penalties. If I get caught speeding, I have to pay the fine. If I break God's laws, I have to pay God's penalties. Because God is a just God. And the Bible tells us the wages of sin is death. Break God's laws and the penalty is death. That's the bad news. But the good news is that "But" (and I'm so grateful for that word!) **but** the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

But like any gift, you have to receive it. Maybe some of you here this morning are thinking "I'm not worthy to receive such a gift. God couldn't possibly accept me after the things I have done." But you're wrong. In Isaiah 30 it says, ***"The Lord longs to be gracious to you."*** God wants to give you that gift. God enjoys being gracious because that is his nature. So just accept God's gift. And when you do your past is forgiven, your future is secured in heaven and you have power for living today. It's God's Amazing Grace. And it's available to you right now. Please pray with me...

Rev. Steve Marshall

Willowbrook United Methodist Church

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