

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,⁷ 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.⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.¹⁰ For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:4-10)

Grace Means Getting a Gift

What does the word “grace” mean? The kids in my catechism class would instantly spit out “God’s undeserved love.” I’m confident of that because I make a really big deal of that point. That definition is totally true and correct. But at the same time, it assumes that we understand the underlying thought in the word. Sometimes, that can get lost. The Greek word that we translate as “grace” literally means a gift. It’s something that someone chooses to give you, as opposed to something that you earn. That idea of grace is at the heart of Paul’s words to us this morning. That idea is very important. Over the years, as I’ve studied other Christian churches, I’ve come to the conclusion that how a church defines grace tells you a great deal about what that church really believes and who they really trust in. We need to understand how the Bible uses this word.

Grace means getting a gift.

I.

Some gifts are precious because of who gave them. Other gifts are simply valuable. Then there are those unique gifts that combine both of those things. **Grace means getting a gift. God’s gift is life.** The last job my dad had before he retired was for the Oracle software company. He worked in their international division, so he and my mom bounced from country to country, spending six months here or a year there. When they visited us, they brought gifts for the kids from whatever country they were just coming from. My children really only could’ve gotten those gifts from their grandparents. We have gifts that we only could get from God. And those gifts reflect his unique relationship with us. St. Paul says, **“Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ.”**

God has great love for us. We modern Americans tend to think of love in terms of feelings. But true love is also actions and choices. If someone talks about how much they love you, but then they treat you badly, that love isn’t real, even if the feelings are. Real love works for the good of the one I love. God is rich in love. His gifts always serve our good. And God is rich in mercy. He looked down on this world and he saw every human being who would ever live. He saw what we would make of our lives. He saw that we could never reach heaven. And his mercy moved him to get us there.

So what gift do we receive from a God like that? Life. Paul says that while we were dead in our sins, God made us alive in Christ. When I was in college I worked for a home for people who were developmentally challenged. I spent a year working with very elderly residents. A couple times, individuals died while I was working and I had to get them ready for the funeral home. Even though those guys were very helpful when they were alive – they supported weight even if they were in a wheel chair, they worked with you to get them dressed – once they were dead, they couldn’t help at all. They couldn’t stand even a little bit. They couldn’t bend their arm to get it in or out of a sleeve. They couldn’t even *want* to do those things. They were dead.

God says that we were all dead in sin. Now, obviously, he doesn’t mean that we were physically dead. We were dead spiritually. That means we were totally separated from God. Why? Because of our sin. Sin builds a wall between us and God. Notice, Paul doesn’t spend any time in this passage spelling out specific sins, like getting drunk or sleeping around or hating because it doesn’t really matter which sins we’re guilty of. All sin has the same effect. Even if I’ve never robbed or murdered anyone, even if I think that lots of people are worse than I am, my sin still made me dead spiritually. Now, that was not true for a terribly long time for me, personally. I was baptized as a baby and I don’t remember the time before I believed. But I was dead. And so were you. Before you came to faith in Christ, you did not want to follow God. You could not want to follow

God. You had no ability to choose to believe or to invite God into your life. You were dead, separated from God and doomed to hell.

But God is rich in mercy. He didn't want us to die or go to hell. So he made us alive in Christ. He gave us faith. He drew us near to him and gave us a promise of eternal life. St. Paul says, **“And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.”** God has already raised us. God has already seated us with Jesus in heaven. Look around you. Does this look like heaven? Not really. But being here is a little taste of heaven. Whenever we are in contact with the gospel, we have a little foretaste of eternal life. Paul is talking here about the close connection between our new life here and our life to come in heaven. They are one and the same life. The life we live in Christ here is the beginning of the eternal life we will have in heaven. We no longer belong to this world. The gift of God is that we now belong to him. When we die, that doesn't change. We go on living with Christ in heaven. When these bodies rise from the dead, they will rejoin a life in progress, a life that we will be celebrating with Christ. That is a very great gift.

But while we're here, we do have only a foretaste of heaven. **“In the coming ages”** in heaven and in the new world after the resurrection, God will show us **“the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”** Sometimes, we don't appreciate just how valuable a gift is. My wife occasionally watches *Antiques Roadshow* on PBS. Once in a while, someone will bring in something that their parents bought years ago and it's just been laying around. Then the appraisers tell them that it's worth thousands or even tens of thousands of dollars. Maybe they appreciated that antique when they thought of it because it reminded them of their parents. But they didn't realize just how rich a gift it was.

The new life that God has given us is our most precious gift. But sometimes, while we wrestling with life down here, it can seem like a bother to do all those things I'm supposed to do because I'm a Christian. Sometimes, people come to church looking for assistance. Showing compassion is part of the new life, but sometimes, my sinful flesh would rather do something else. Sometimes people come to me looking for approval for something they really want to do, but I can't give it because it doesn't agree with God's word. I don't enjoy saying no. But showing people the way God calls us to live is part of our new life here. And doing those things, even when they're hard, is part of the gift God gave us.

So we don't always appreciate just how precious a thing it is to have a new life in Christ. But in the age to come, we will see the richness of God's grace. We will see that God has shown eternal kindness to us by sending his Son to die for the sin that killed us. When Jesus took that sin away, when the Holy Spirit gave us faith and life, God was being kind to us. Even when he called us to live a life that is hard here, he was giving us a gift that is more precious than anything else we have. That life is better than a life of doing what we want when we want because that new life is the beginning of the life we will live with Christ forever.

II.

God's gifts are the most precious gifts we'll ever receive. St. Paul keeps hammering away at that idea of grace. **Grace means receiving a gift. God's gift is the work he does.** Paul says, **“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.”** We don't deserve God's grace. That's where that definition of grace as “God's undeserved love” comes from. A true gift is not something we earn. It's something the giver chooses to give us. We don't always understand that in our world today. Think about an inheritance. Isn't that supposed to be gift someone gives when they die? But how often don't we think that someone deserved a better inheritance because they were so much more attentive to the dying person's needs than someone else was? By that way of thinking, the inheritance isn't a gift freely given by the person who died. It's a payment for services rendered. It's a reward for time and attention and effort.

A true gift isn't like that. Think of the gifts we give our children at birthdays or Christmas. Did they work for those gifts? No. We give them because we love them and we would be offended if our children acted like we parents owed them really expensive presents. God's gift is undeserved. None of us should get to heaven. But by God's grace, his free gift, we are saved from death and hell.

That gift does come by faith. Faith means trusting a promise. If we don't believe that God really gave us that new life in heaven, then we aren't going to have the benefit. We'll try to get to heaven on our own and we'll fail and go to hell. Most of you know that my older children attend Michigan Lutheran Seminary in Saginaw. It's about 100 miles from our doorstep to the dormitory. My children have to trust that one of the adults in our car pool will drive them there. If on a Sunday they decided that they were adults now and they

could get there on their own and so they packed their clothes and books and they started walking, would they reach Saginaw by nightfall? Not a chance. God has given us eternal life through Christ. The only way for us to get that gift is to trust in Jesus. Even that faith is a gift from God. We sinners could never choose to believe. So God comes to us in the promise of eternal life and he reaches into our hearts and he gives us the faith which brings us to heaven.

With that gift of a new life in heaven, comes a new life now. Paul says, **“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”** We are what God has made us. We are created anew in Christ. God reaches into the hearts of dead sinners, and he makes them living believers. He did that so that we could live for him, doing good works. What is good work? Well, it’s not just being “nice.” In fact, sometimes being nice isn’t being good. If a person with an alcohol problem asks you to get them a beer, smiling and bringing them one is nice, but it isn’t good. It’s sinful and destructive. A good work is always something that follows what God says, even when it’s a hard thing. And a good work always comes from our faith. It never comes from sin or lust or selfishness.

God creates every opportunity we have to do good works. Those opportunities come every moment of every day. Every week, we have the opportunity to make hearing his word a priority in our lives. Every day, we have the opportunity to love and honor our spouse, instead of treating him or her like a comfortable old shoe that we can just kick under the bed. God created us anew and God prepared in advance more opportunities for us to live a new life than we could ever count. And every opportunity is a gift he gives us.

A few weeks ago, I saw a rerun of a TV show in which a character was complaining about the custom of giving birthday presents. He was going to go out and spend money on a gift that the other person wouldn’t like and she would just take it back and exchange it. Then she would feel obligated to spend at least as much or more on a gift for him that he would take back and exchange. Then he would spend at least as much or more on her the next time around and the cycle would continue until one of them died and released the other from the social obligation. You know what? That’s not grace. Those aren’t gifts. A true gift is freely given, without worrying about how much the other person has given us. God has given us a gift that did not come from any obligation. It came from his love and compassion. It was a gift we could never earn or deserve. It was the gift of life through Christ our Savior. That gift is ours now. The most we can do is say thank you with a life of love for God and our neighbor. We will never repay what Christ has done for us. But we can live in his love. Commit yourself to that new life. Amen.