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The Wonderful Grace of Jesus

Acts 9:1–22

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A man who lived in England came over to the United States to go to a resort for several months. He wanted to bring along his Rolls-Royce for the trip, so he had it carefully packaged and shipped overseas. While visiting the U.S., something happened to the car—a mechanical failure of some sort—so he called over to England and explained his problem to the company. Rolls-Royce told him, "That's fine. Within 48 hours, we'll have a mechanic with the auto parts there to fix it for you."

They put a mechanic on a plane with the necessary car parts and flew him to the United States. He worked on the car in the parking lot of the resort, fixed it in good time, got on a plane, and flew back to England. The man happily drove his Rolls for the rest of his time in the U.S. Then he packaged it back up, put it on a ship, and sent it to his home in England.

Nearly a year after the man returned to England, he discovered he had never received a bill from Rolls-Royce. So he wrote the company a letter, saying, "This date last year there was something wrong with my Rolls-Royce and you flew a mechanic over to help me. You fixed it, but I've never received a bill. If you should find that bill in your office, I'll be happy to pay for your efforts at fixing my car."

He received a letter back from Rolls-Royce that simply said: "In the files at the headquarters of Rolls-Royce, there is no such account saying anything has ever been wrong with a Rolls-Royce anywhere that you speak of."¹

This is grace. A debt is owed, but instead of payment being demanded, the debtholder forgives and erases any record of the debt that is owed. The concept of grace is fundamental to Christianity. Without grace, we would all be in trouble because we all would have to seek to earn our way into the presence of God. God's grace is powerful and able to make us whole and to transform us and enable us to live new lives free full of things like love, joy, peace, and hope and free from fear, worry, and self-doubt. But too often, we live our lives dragging around the baggage of past mistakes, trying to earn God's favor, or maybe even trying to convince ourselves that we are loveable or even likeable.

In the beginning of his book, What's So Amazing About Grace?, Phillip Yancey quotes Dr. David Seamands, a pastor and counselor who summed up his career this way: "Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of emotional (and relational)

¹ Mac Brunson, "The Purpose of the Passion," *Preaching Today Audio*, No. 282

problems among Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people. . . . We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not the way we live. The good news of the Gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions."²

This morning I want to challenge you to reflect with me on the unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace of God. I want you to consider with me the height, width, and depths of the grace of God, and wonder again at the fact that no matter who we are, no matter what we have done, no matter what we have been through, God's grace is for you and for me. This may seem very basic and very simple, something that you feel you grasped a long time ago or maybe something that you feel like you have never heard prior to this morning. But Dr. Seamands is right, we often read, hear, and believe a good theology of grace, but does it really impact how we live?

Today's story from the scriptures may be a familiar one, but in case it isn't familiar to you or you don't remember, allow me to refresh your memory and give you some background. At the end of the gospels, Jesus had died and risen from the dead. As the story continues in the book of Acts, Jesus commissions his disciples to go and spread the good news and make disciples everywhere and promises to give them the Holy Spirit to help them.

In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples and they begin to tell others about Jesus, and the church begins to grow, first among the Jews, and then among the Gentiles. The Jewish religious establishment is troubled by the continued growth of the Jesus movement and its claim that Jesus is the Son of God, he has risen from the dead, and through him sins can be forgiven. And so they seek to bring it to an end by putting one of its leaders, a man named Stephen, on trial. Stephen testifies that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and so angers the religious leaders that they stone him to death on the spot. On the scene is a young man named Saul, who holds the cloaks of those doing the stoning, approving of the killing.

Saul then sets out to round up followers of Jesus for more trials, seeking to bring an end to the Jesus movement through violence and murder, and here we pick up the story in Acts 9:

¹⁻² All this time Saul was breathing down the necks of the Master's disciples, out for the kill. He went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to take to the meeting places in Damascus so that if he found anyone there belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem.

² Phillip Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace?, p 15

³⁻⁴He set off. When he got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?"

Now at this point we can only imagine what Saul was thinking. He's probably surprised and at least a little fearful because he has been suddenly blinded and has been asked an accusatory question, "Why are you persecuting me?" Maybe he doesn't know who is speaking to him, or maybe he has an idea of who is questioning him, but hopes that he isn't right. The story continues:

⁵⁻⁶He said, "Who are you, Master?"

"I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down."

At this point, Saul must have thought that his life was over. He had been attempting to snuff out the movement that Jesus had started, and now Jesus has revealed himself to Saul as the Son of God. Saul's heart must have dropped in fear. Saul must have expected that he was about to die, but instead of being struck dead, Jesus continues:

I want you to get up and enter the city. In the city you'll be told what to do next."

⁷⁻⁹His companions stood there dumbstruck—they could hear the sound, but couldn't see anyone—while Saul, picking himself up off the ground, found himself stone-blind. They had to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus. He continued blind for three days. He ate nothing, drank nothing.

Instead of receiving the punishment he deserves, losing his life because of the lives that he has taken, Saul gets a reprieve and finds himself blinded by this vision of Jesus. We can only imagine what those three days must have been like for Saul. Paul must have felt deep sorrow and grief he must have felt to discover that he had been wrong about what he believed, wrong to pursue his mission of persecuting and killing Christians. He is so grieved that he does not eat or drink, with his blindness as a reminder of who he has been, what he has done, and of his experience with Jesus.

¹⁰There was a disciple in Damascus by the name of Ananias. The Master spoke to him in a vision: "Ananias."

"Yes, Master?" he answered.

¹¹⁻¹²"Get up and go over to Straight Avenue. Ask at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus. His name is Saul. He's there praying. He has just had a dream in which he saw a man named Ananias enter the house and lay hands on him so he could see again."

Now imagine that you are Ananias. God has spoken to you and tells you to go and extend his grace to someone like Saul. Someone who has been threatening you and your friends and family with violence. A murderer. Someone you are afraid or suspicious of. And so Ananias thinks as we often do, he questions whether God really should be gracious to Saul.

¹³⁻¹⁴Ananias protested, "Master, you can't be serious. Everybody's talking about this man and the terrible things he's been doing, his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem! And now he's shown up here with papers from the Chief Priest that give him license to do the same to us."

Basically Ananias is thinking, "Umm, God, are you sure about this? This guy isn't worthy of your grace. Maybe you haven't heard about what he/she has done or what they are like, so let me tell you . . ." We live in a world where the dominant thought pattern is that you should get what you've got coming to you. If someone hits us, we strike them back, but maybe harder. That people should get what they deserve.

And this is what must have been going through Ananias' head. C'mon God, this guy has got to be beyond the limits of your grace! He's not worthy. Haven't you heard what he has done?

It's not uncommon for us to consider some people to be irredeemable, is it? As we watch the news, as we read about people who are famous (or infamous), as we travel through our lives and encounter people, we write off people don't we? Consider some people to be beyond the reach of the grace of God, think that God can't possibly want this person or that person. But if there is one thing that this passage makes clear, it is that no one is beyond the grace. God loves everyone, even murderers like Saul. As much as we would often like to, we don't get to determine who can receive God's grace and mercy.

There are times in our lives where God's grace may make us angry as we see it offered to people that we do not feel deserve it. However, the failure to extend unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace only leads us into difficulty in our lives and our relationships. We cannot become the people that God wants us to be or experience the fullness of the love, joy, peace,

and hope that comes through the power of the grace of God unless we are willing to offer it to others.

In those moments where we don't want to extend grace to others, we need to remember that we don't deserve it either. God offers it to everyone as a gift out of the riches of his love. Instead of labeling people as beyond the grace of God, maybe we should instead be praying that God would arrange for them a miraculous encounter with his grace that would transform their lives and turn them into followers of Jesus, like is happening here in our story here about Saul.

¹⁵⁻¹⁶But the Master said, "Don't argue. Go! I have picked him as my personal representative to non-Jews and kings and Jews. And now I'm about to show him what he's in for—the hard suffering that goes with this job."

¹⁷⁻¹⁹So Ananias went and found the house, placed his hands on blind Saul, and said, "Brother Saul, the Master sent me, the same Jesus you saw on your way here. He sent me so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." No sooner were the words out of his mouth than something like scales fell from Saul's eyes—he could see again! He got to his feet, was baptized, and sat down with them to a hearty meal.

Now imagine how Saul felt at this point. Not only had encountered the living Jesus and did not lose his life, but instead only his sight. Now Saul has had his sight restored by a man who has been sent by Jesus so that he could see and join the movement of Jesus followers. We should note that this passage gives no indication that Saul knew that God was going to send someone to free him from his blindness, welcome him into the Christian community, and commission him as a servant of Jesus. Can you imagine what that hearty meal tasted like to Saul after three days spent fasting, praying, and repenting of his efforts to persecute the followers of Jesus?

¹⁹⁻²¹Saul spent a few days getting acquainted with the Damascus disciples, but then went right to work, wasting no time, preaching in the meeting places that this Jesus was the Son of God. They were caught off guard by this and, not at all sure they could trust him, they kept saying, "Isn't this the man who wreaked havoc in Jerusalem among the believers? And didn't he come here to do the same thing—arrest us and drag us off to jail in Jerusalem for sentencing by the high priests?"

²²But their suspicions didn't slow Saul down for even a minute. His momentum was up now and he plowed straight into the opposition, disarming the Damascus Jews and trying to show them that this Jesus was the Messiah.³

This experience of grace totally transforms Saul and he makes total change of direction. Instead of persecuting the church he is baptized and joins it. And then goes right to work again, this time proclaiming and teaching that Jesus is the Son of God. He is so invigorated by his experience of grace that he is going looking for opposition, seeking to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah.

The rest of the story is that Saul changes his name to Paul, and serves as a missionary and teacher spreading the good news of God's grace throughout the ancient world. He writes a numerous letters to encourage and instruct churches, some of which survived history and were included in the scriptures.

God's work in Saul's life is a shining example of grace. Saul's actions placed him in a position that was diametrically opposed to Jesus and God's work in the world. He deserves punishment, but instead he receives forgiveness and grace from Jesus. He is totally transformed by this grace and he sets out on the new mission that God has chosen him for, to be God's personal representative to non-Jews, kings, and Jews alike which we can read about in the following chapters in the book of Acts as well as in the letters in the New Testament that Saul/Paul wrote.

Saul could have wallowed in what he had done, beat himself up for the kind of person he had been, continually questioned whether God really could like him, let alone love him because of his past, as we often do, but that's not what Saul does, is it? Instead he embraces the God's gifts of love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness and allows them to transform his life, his mission, and his purpose.

In Ephesians 2, which we read as our call to worship this morning, you can hear Saul telling not just the story of his own life, but the story of all our lives. Reflect on these words again:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh,

³ Acts 9:1-22, [The Message](#)

following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

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. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.⁴

This is the wonder of grace, and it is this grace that distinguishes Christianity from other faiths. Bono, the frontman for the rock band U2 describes it this way: "It's a mind-blowing concept that the God who created the universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people, but the thing that keeps me on my knees is the difference between grace and karma. . . . You see, at the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics—in physical laws—every action is met by an equal or an opposite one. It's clear to me that karma is at the very heart of the universe. I'm absolutely sure of it. And yet, along comes this idea called grace to upend all that "as you reap, so you will sow" stuff. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. . . . It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity."⁵

Bono is exactly right. God's grace defies reason and logic, it interrupts the consequences of our actions. Jesus took our sins on the cross and we cannot and do not depend on our own list of religious accomplishments or knowledge, good deeds, or our giving or sacrifices. We depend on grace. It is grace that saves us and raises us up to a new life full of love and joy and peace and hope. As Saul writes in Ephesians, there is nothing we can do to earn or achieve it, it is a gift of God that we can only choose to embrace and accept and then offer it to others

⁴ Ephesians 2:1-10, NRSV

⁵ *Michka Assayas, Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas (Riverhead Books, 2005) pp 203-204.*

As we reflect upon grace and accept that God loves us unconditionally, allow him to forgive us, and accept his love and forgiveness as a free gift, our lives are transformed. It does not matter what we have done, how we think we have failed, or how loveable or even likeable we feel that we are, God's love, grace, and forgiveness are for me and for you and even for people like Saul.

May you this day and everyday be moved, touched, and inspired by the unconditional love and grace of God. May it transform you and free you from your past and make you whole. May you share this love and grace with everyone you meet. May you always be thankful for the unmerited gift of God's grace, and may you seek each day to do the things that God has made you to do. Amen.