

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Lent 4

March 10, 2024

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

Grace, pure grace, and nothing but grace

—Ephesians 2:1-10

It's a word we are well familiar with and use frequently. The word is "grace." "Grace be to you and peace!" "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you!" Amazing grace, how sweet the sound! We are saved by grace alone. We know of organizations called "Time of Grace," and "Grace in Action." We even know people who are named Grace. It's a beautiful word!

Yet grace is a concept we find very difficult to grasp. We may have a ready definition for anyone who asks: Grace is *undeserved love*. Simple, right? But probing the depths of grace calls for a lifetime of serious contemplation, and we won't ever completely grasp the full measure of grace this side of eternity. Why do we try so hard to be right and find it so hard to admit it when we're wrong? Could it be because we're weak in our understanding of grace? Why is it so hard to confess our sins against God and our neighbor and say those important words, "I'm sorry?" It's because we don't quite trust in grace. Why do we become careless, indifferent, and complacent toward God? Why do we neglect God's Word? Why do we find other things more important than worship? Why don't we hunger for and crave the Sacrament? It's because we really don't grasp what grace is all about. Why do we allow ourselves to become consumed by worry? Why are we afraid of not having enough, not getting ahead, not getting what we're owed? Could it be because we've lost sight of grace? Why do we become angry at the person who cuts in line or the person who cuts in front of us on the road? Does our indignation flow from a lack of grace? Why do we become mean and nasty and impatient and spew hurtful, vitriolic words that hurt and destroy, if not because grace is missing?

Grace! We have our simple definition (undeserved love), but what sounds so sublimely simple is, in fact, supremely difficult to grasp, and if it were up to us, we would never grasp it. Fortunately, you and I are products of grace; we are trophies of grace. We are saved by grace, pure grace, and nothing but grace.

To even begin to comprehend grace we have to look at where grace has brought us from. The Apostle Paul writes, "*You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked when you followed the ways of this present world. You were following the ruler of the domain of the air, the spirit now at work in the people who disobey.*" Look at where you and I came from. We were serving Satan. We were spiritually dead. Not just wounded, not just broken, not just hurting, not just spiritually sick. Dead! It's the most powerful description of our naturally unbelieving hearts that Scripture can set before us. We were not nice, well-intentioned people, who just needed a little encouragement and perhaps a hand up. Dead! Think spiritual corpses. Spiritually we had no desire to choose God, we could not will ourselves to follow God, we could not cut a deal with God to fix our situation, we could not help God turn ourselves around. A corpse can do none of those things. The only thing a corpse can do is rot and stink, and that was precisely your spiritual condition. It was also my condition, the apostle's condition, and the spiritual condition of every natural human being. "*Formerly, we all lived among them in the passions of our sinful flesh, as we carried out the desires of the sinful flesh and its thoughts. Like all the others, we were by nature objects of God's wrath.*" Dead in sin. Under the curse and condemnation of sin. Not only were we swimming in the disgusting behavior of this dark world, but we were relying on our own behavior to save us. Dreadful! Horrifying! Spiritual death leads to an empty, meaningless existence on this earth that culminates in physical death, followed by God's judgment on our sin, and an everlasting sentence for our sin, to be served in hell. *We were by nature objects of God's wrath.*

Stop! Ruminant on that for a moment. Let it sink in. If you have even the slightest idea that it's other people who deserve the wrath of God, if we entertain even the tiniest notion that God owes us something other than eternal death, if we are still holding on in the faintest way to our own goodness, our own righteousness, our own virtue, our own whatever—and think that somehow there's something in me that makes God love me and want to reward me—then the whole meaning of grace is lost. That's not *undeserved* love; it's *deserved* love. And that's not grace. Grace is completely one-sided. It's all God. God loves the unlovable, the wicked, sinners, evildoers. God loves the ungodly. Anything else is not grace. Scripture says, "There is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace" (Romans 11:5,6).

Thankfully, Scripture says that is all in the past. This is what we were—objects of wrath. But it is not what we are now. The difference between what we were and what we now are is grace. *But God, because he is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in trespasses. It is by grace you have been saved!* Wow! What an incredible gift! God took hold of you when you were hopelessly dead in sin, and his Holy Spirit breathed into you the breath of life. He raised you from spiritual death. It wasn't your doing; it was all God. You didn't earn it; it was all God. It wasn't because of something he saw in you, some vast potential that

he saw you had to be a good Christian; it was all inside God, because of who God is, because of his heart of grace, because he is rich in mercy. He saved you by his grace. Grace, pure grace, and nothing but grace!

Stop! Ruminates on that. Breathe that in! Now you are no longer an object of wrath; now you are a child of God. Now you are no longer dead in sin; you are alive in Christ and filled with his Spirit. You are no longer serving Satan; you are a servant of the Most High God. How did God accomplish this? By his grace! In eternity, before you were ever born, God determined to rescue you. In order to cancel the debt of our sin and to satisfy perfect justice, the Son of God took on human flesh, was born as our brother in this human race, so that he could fulfill the law and become our righteousness. On the hill called Calvary outside Jerusalem, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, carried the weight of our wickedness and spilled his blood for our sins and for the sins of the world. Our sins were placed on him, so that in him we might be covered with the righteousness of God. Then Jesus' perfect obedience was given to you when you were born again in baptism. St. Paul writes to Titus, "When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:4-7). Grace, pure grace, and nothing but grace!

And it keeps getting better; look at the parallels between Jesus and you. Paul says, "*He also raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.*" Jesus was raised from death to life on the third day, showing that death is powerless and sin is paid for. God brought you from death to life with Christ; you live in the power of his resurrection and forgiveness. Then 40 days after his resurrection from the dead, Jesus ascended into heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. Paul says God seated *you* with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. The picture is one of complete power, undiminished conquest. This world cannot take away your victory in Christ. Satan and all his minions cannot rob you of your heavenly conquest. You are in Christ, forgiven in him, wrapped up in him, victorious with him. It doesn't matter how the world sees you, it doesn't matter if you make a million bucks, it doesn't matter if you are cheated or wronged because you did what was right, it doesn't matter if your health fails and your body grows weak, it doesn't matter if you lose everything. The victory of Christ, the joy and peace of forgiveness, the power of the Holy Spirit in you are yours right now because you are in Christ, and Christ is in you, and you are his. And if that is what you enjoy right now as a child of God, just wait for what God has planned for you in the life of the world to come. *He did this so that, in the coming ages, he might demonstrate the surpassing riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.* You cannot even begin to imagine what God is preparing for you when you finally meet your Savior face to face! For all eternity, for ages unending, you will revel in grace, pure grace, and nothing but grace!

Ephesians 2:8,9 is such a beautiful summary; many of you have memorized this passage: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*

Your whole existence is the handiwork of God. *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance so that we would walk in them.* This is a really neat passage. It reminds us that we are a creation of God with purpose. We are here to honor God and serve our neighbor, and in so doing we serve Christ. Think of it this way: you are a trophy of grace. God fought for you against all the forces of hell, wrestled you from Satan's grasp, washed you in the blood of your Savior Jesus, brought you from death to life in baptism. You are a hard-fought, hard-won trophy earned by the blood, sweat, tears, suffering and death of God's holy Son. You are a trophy of grace! So what do you do with a trophy? You put it on display! You are God's living witness to the world around you! You are a walking, talking, living, breathing testimony to God's grace! Let God's grace be seen through you. You have received grace, now you get to show grace to those around you. In your kindness, your humility, your giving of yourself, your selflessness, in your standing up for the truth, in your resistance against evil, in your gentleness and your generosity, let your light shine in people's presence, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). These are the good works that God has prepared in advance for you to do in Christ Jesus, to show everyone that you are saved by grace, pure grace, and nothing but grace. Amen.