

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

### “Grace Alone”

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#### Ephesians 2:1-10

*2You were dead through the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. <sup>4</sup>But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup>even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup>and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup>so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup>not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>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.*

Ray Raycroft tells the story of a Yankee who was driving to Atlanta, Georgia for a business meeting. He had never been in the south before in his life. After staying in a motel overnight, he stopped at a nearby restaurant for breakfast before hitting the road for the final leg of his journey. When his breakfast was delivered, the man saw on his plate before him this white, mushy, unappetizing stuff. He had no idea what it was nor was he certain it was even safe to eat. He hoped that somehow the waitress had made a mistake in his order. When she came by, the man asked her about his meal and she said that is exactly what he ordered. He then questioned her about what the white stuff was. The waitress replied, “Grits.” The man answered, “I’m sorry ma’am, but I didn’t order any grits and I’m certainly not going to pay for them.” The waitress rolled her eyes and said, “Sir, you’re not from around here, are you? Down here you don’t order grit and you don’t pay for grits. You just get grits.” And with that she simply walked away. Such too is the way of the grace of God!

I had a friend whose wisdom about life I truly respected. One of the things I admired about him was that he had successfully raised four daughters, so I would listen intently to what he had to say about parenting girls to be young women. One day during a conversation he said to me, “Art, do you know what your problem is?” Now, how do you respond to a question like that? Do I know what my problem is? I know I have lots of problems but I never know which one is being noticed? On that occasion my friend was eager to tell me. He said, “You want to parent your children like you are God.” I still wasn’t sure about my part of the conversation but I played along hoping the answers were yet to come. I admitted to my friend that I was guilty of always trying to

do my best for my girls. “That’s not what I mean,” he said. “You can’t treat your girls the same way God treats all of us. God gives us things whether we deserve them or not. We want to do the same with our kids. But we also need to teach them to set goals and achieve them, to appreciate the value of hard work, and to ultimately fend for themselves in a tough world. I know you love them, but sometimes it doesn’t help them at all when you try to parent with too much grace.” I remember thinking to myself, “Too much grace? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

I enjoyed sitting in on the Adult Christian Education class “Living the Questions” last Tuesday as they batted around the idea of God’s grace. They were trying to define what grace really is. I must admit, it is a hard thing to get your arms around. The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible defines grace as God’s unmerited, free, spontaneous love for sinful humanity as revealed and made effective in Jesus Christ. God offers grace to humanity with the special purpose of accomplishing good things that men and women cannot do for themselves. Grace is the reverse of a reward for good conduct or performance. Grace is an unearned gift that God supplies to deliver humanity from deep failure.

“For it is by God’s grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God’s gift, so that no one can boast about it.” These words from the book of Ephesians describe the grace of God as something undeserved, unearned, yet awarded freely. Although many scholars still debate the exact authorship of these words, the theology described in them is purely Pauline. One who believes in Christ lives in a new creation, with ideas of the old world now passed away. The reality of that old world was based on the anxiety of having to follow rules, the worry of how to win the game, the chances to prove oneself by works or knowledge or status. In other words, in the old world- one had to merit worth and ultimate salvation.

I remember a long time ago when I was in fifth grade. One Saturday I was invited watching my brother play basketball with the big boys- the sixth graders who were working with the high school basketball coach. I was dying to be out there on the court, but I knew I wasn’t old enough or good enough. I had to be content to shoot baskets on the sideline and hope someone would notice. It appeared no one did. After practice all of the big boys went into the locker room to shower and change. But then the coach walked over to me. He was carrying a can of Tuff-Skin, an antiseptic for scrapes and floor burns. Without saying a word he bent down and began to spray some Tuff-Skin on my knee. I remember that glorious feeling. The high school basketball coach had noticed my floor burns and had treated me. I didn’t want to wash it off for weeks. I was accepted. I was lifted up. I was made to feel whole. And I didn’t have to do a thing.

Paul writes that now the world is turned upside down. Instead of living to gain or win salvation, God has acted for us in Jesus so we can now live in the assurance that we are already made worthy. Nothing we do will add one speck to the goodness of the gift. Faith is the courage to live life without the fear and anxiety of trying to earn more blessings or measure up to any difficult standards. It is an attitude of humbly recognizing the goodness of the giver.

The technical term for this kind of thought is “justification by grace through faith.” We are made acceptable before God not through our own action but by God’s grace and we respond by living confidently and thankfully in recognition of that grace.

Justification by grace through faith. Remember that and you will impress all your friends at the water cooler or health club tomorrow! But this was Paul's signature card. It was what inspired Martin Luther to reforming action. We cannot earn God's love and acceptance through extra piety or sacrifice or extra giving to the church. It's already ours through God's generosity and the key is to live recognizing that gift.

It is easy for us to get caught up in the futile game of earning the approval of God, keeping track of the goodness of our lives with that scoreboard we carry in our minds. Or perhaps we have tired of winning God's approval so we are off chasing our own pleasure and desire, trying to impress with our own looks and abilities, all the while hoping to prove our worth through human standards. But Paul writes that none of that is what save us. None is that is what makes us worthy in the eyes of God. God simply loves. And it is God's grace that brings us back to who we were created to be. Robert McAfee Brown writes, "Grace is the love of God, undeserved, but reaching out to you right where you are, offering itself without reservation to meet your need."

In his book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C.S. Lewis writes of the bitter specimen of humanity that was Eustace Scrubb, a young man so nasty and insufferable that he was changed into a dragon. After a while he discovered that it was not pleasant being a dragon. In fact he discovered that it was not enjoyable sulking and being angry. And so Eustace Scrubb the dragon, begins to help rather than to hinder those who have been stranded on an island with him. The problem is that he still cannot lose his dragon skin. It won't come off no matter how hard he works at shedding it. It is only possible for him to be changed back to his rightful form when he consents to let Aslan the Lion, the king of beasts, to use his claws to scratch off the terrible scales. Eustace the dragon cannot save himself. He can be saved only by an undeserved gift of love from a higher power.

U2 lead singer Bono was being interviewed in a religious magazine. I know that Bono is an extremely spiritual man and in the interview he was speaking about the idea of karma- and its place in all religions. Karma is kind of the "in thing" right now, especially if you are a regular viewer of the television series *My Name is Earl*. Bono said, "What you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth...It is clear to me that karma is at the very heart of the universe." And then suddenly Bono seemed to be grasped by God. He had a second thought and continued, "And yet, along comes this idea called grace to upend all that 'as you reap, so you will sow' stuff. Grace defied reason and logic. Love interrupts the consequences of your actions." I love that last sentence as a description of God's grace: love interrupting the consequences of our actions. It is love that interrupts our failure, forgives us and lifts up to God. It is love that interrupts our schemes and plans, humbles us and brings us down to serve one another.

What must one do to become a great athlete? Practice your sport daily. What must one do to become a great musician? Practice with the instrument daily. What must one do to become a great scholar? Study daily. What must one do to become a great farmer? Care for the crops and tend to the livestock daily. What must one do to become a follower of Christ? Know that the work has already been done. Simply believe in the grace of God received through Jesus the Christ. Accept it, give thanks for it, and most importantly live thankfully, offering to others words and deeds that reflect the love of God.

