

The Message of the Cross: Grace
John 1:14-17

The story (I assume it's apocryphal, but who knows...) is told about a woman who went to a photographer to get a portrait done. She was anticipating the day when he would call her back to see the result of his work on her photos.

When he revealed the pictures, she was aghast. In her estimation the photos were terrible — they made her look too old, too heavy, and too unhappy. They were nothing like her, in her estimation. So she complained about them and he resisted and pointed out some positive features about the pictures, which just provoked her anger and disappointment even more. She then threatened not to pay, which provoked him to being less than kind with his assessment. Finally, she exploded, “These pictures are terrible — I demand justice!” Too which he quickly replied, “Lady, you don't need justice; you need mercy.”

It is true that we all need mercy; we just aren't always ready to admit our need.

In 2 Timothy, Paul exhorts his young disciple, “Remember Christ Jesus, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel” (2:8). Every time we come to the communion table, that is what we are doing: we are remembering the person and work of Christ. And as we come to the communion table this morning, I want to remind us of one of the great themes that emanate from the cross: the grace of God.

As you turn to the familiar passage of John 1, you will remember that the main theme of that passage is the advent of Christ and the testimony that attested to Him. But at the end of the introductory section of that chapter (vv. 14-18), the sub-theme of God's grace appears. It is those verses and that theme that I want to particularly draw to your attention. And as we examine these verses, we will find that —

CHRIST'S LIFE AND THE CROSS REVEAL THE EXTENT OF GOD'S GRACE.

This passage reveals three means of God's grace — and the magnitude and depth of God's grace increases with each successive revelation, culminating in the person of Christ.

- 1. COMMON Grace: Gods' Grace Revealed to ALL MEN (vv. 14-15)**
- 2. COMMON Grace: God's Grace Revealed through THE LAW (v. 16b)**
- 3. PARTICULAR Grace: God's Grace Revealed through CHRIST (vv. 16a, 17)**

- When we talk about God's grace, there are many different explanations or interpretations of His grace. One explanation is it is "God's Riches At Christ's Expense." Tozer's definition is better:

"Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines him to bestow benefits on the undeserving."

[Knowledge of the Holy, 100.]

- How is that good pleasure manifested? And where do we see His good pleasure? Here are three revelations of God's good pleasure — grace that is unimaginable to us:

1. **COMMON** Grace: Gods' Grace Revealed to **ALL MEN** (vv. 14-15)

- The main point John makes in this passage is that Christ is God and eternally has been God (vv. 1, 2, 4, 9). And it also points to the truth that salvation is only through Christ (vv. 9, 12).
- And verse 14 affirms not only that *the Word became flesh*, but that *He dwelt among us* = "live in a tent/tabernacle" (Ex. 25:8-9; 33:7-8 — this "tent of meeting" was a "tent of witness" [LXX]) — the flesh of Christ became the new location of God's presence on earth, so that men might see the *glory of God* more fully (cf. 2:19-21)! When Christ came, He was the greatest Self-expression of God (cp. Heb. 1:1-2). "God chose to make himself known, finally and ultimately, in a real, historical man." [Carson, 127]
 - ✓ That they *beheld* Him suggests they contemplated on the totality of His life (teaching, miracles, cross, resurrection, 19:35) and attributed it to God's glory.
 - V. 14 is a reference to Peter, James, and John on Mt. of Transfiguration (Mk. 9:1ff)
 - But vv. 10-11 are a reference to Christ's common appearance to all Israel
 - ✓ As they looked at His glory, they could sum it up in two words: the totality of *grace* and *truth* — perhaps a ref. to OT concepts of covenant love/loyalty and faithfulness (Ex. 33:18-19; 34:6). In the OT, the Israelites knew of the loyal love of God through the covenant with Abraham, but that *grace* and the *truth* (faithfulness) of God were fully realized in Christ.
- He came to live with us so that God's glory and grace would be seen more clearly. And we don't want to miss this — when Christ came, He was seen by *all*. Jews saw Him. Gentiles saw Him. Believing Jews and believing Gentiles saw Him. And unbelieving Jews and Gentiles saw Him (vv. 10-11). This is part of what theologians call common grace.
- Common grace refers to God's goodness and kindness to all men universally:

- ✓ God upholds the laws and processes of nature — sun, rain, daily cycles, etc... (Ps. 65:9; Mt. 5:45)
 - ✓ God sustains all forms of life, including human (Ps. 36:6; Acts 17:28)
 - ✓ God supplies temporal needs like food, water, and shelter worldwide (Ps. 65:9; **104:14**; Acts 14:17)
 - ✓ The Spirit of God restrains the power of sin (Rom. 13:1-4; 2 Thess. 2:6-7)
 - ✓ God withholds judgment that is earned and merited (Gen. 8:21-22; Rom. 2:4)
 - ✓ God facilitates and allows the development of all creative works of man — philosophy, the arts, sciences, and technology (Ex. 31:2-11; 35:30-35)
 - ✓ God maintains social and political order (Prov. 21:1; Dan. 4; **Rom. 13:3-4**)
 - ✓ God gives sinners time to repent (Rom. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9)
 - ✓ “In sum, God’s common grace facilitates everything that sustains and enhances life on this fallen planet. Because of it sinners are not as bad as they could be. Common grace, in other words, accounts for the existence individually of ‘splendid pagans’ and corporately of ‘civic righteousness’ in a fallen world.” [Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 76-77.]
- God extends His kindness to all men. That’s common grace. Everywhere around us are evidences of God’s universal grace.

*“If you question the love and goodness of God to all, look again at the world in which we live. Someone might say, ‘There’s a lot of sorrow in this world.’ The only reason the sorrow and tragedy stand out is because there is also much joy and gladness. The only reason we recognize the ugliness is that God has given us so much beauty. The only reason we feel the disappointment is that there is so much that satisfies. [MacArthur, *The Truth About Grace*, 8-9.]*

- All common grace is a testimony to all men of two things: the greatness and glory of God, and the need to repent (Rom. 1). And so the greatest act of God’s common grace was the sending of the Son of God to take on human flesh so that all men might see Him and all men might hear this call: “God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent” (Acts 17:30).

2. **COMMON Grace: God’s Grace Revealed through THE LAW (v. 16b)**

- When we think of common grace, we think generally of the physical world; there also is a manifestation of God’s common grace in the spiritual world — and it is God’s Law.
- Verse 14 says that Christ is ***full of grace and truth*** — that is, Christ was the full expression of both God’s grace and God’s truth. What had only been revealed partially through the prophets and the OT Scriptures is now revealed fully through Christ.

- And out *of* that *fullness* of Christ, John says *we have all received* (contrast with *seen*, v. 14, another indication of particular grace) — there has been a gift to believers and that gift is *grace upon grace*.
 - ✓ This is actually an interesting phrase — lit., “grace against/opposed to/in place of grace.”
 - ✓ The typical prepositions for something being on top of something else are *epi* or *huper* (e.g., *hyperactive*). But John uses *anti* here (the only time he ever uses the word, which indicates he has a specific meaning in mind). The word *anti* (e.g., antibiotic, antifreeze, anticlimax, antichrist) typically means “in place of” or “instead of.” So this phrase should probably be translated, “grace *instead of* grace.” But what does that mean?
 - ✓ Generally interpreters (and until this week this is what I thought) have understood this to mean that when God’s grace in one particular instance ends, there is another grace to take its place. So God’s grace is stacked one on top of another, in a never-ending pile of great kindness to us. That *is* true, but I don’t think that’s what John has in mind here.
 - ✓ John is saying that there was a one kind of grace that had been given by God, and when Christ came, the grace that is realized in Christ replaced that first grace. “Christ’s grace instead of [another] grace.” The question then is, “well what was that other grace?” John tells us —
 - ✓ Verse 17 — *for* (that transitional word is key to understanding what John is saying) *the Law was given through Moses*. That’s the first grace. And then the second grace is *grace and truth are revealed through Jesus Christ*. In other words, John is saying, “the Law was one evidence of God’s grace to us who are redeemed, but Christ came with a greater kind of grace that supersedes and takes the place of the Mosaic Law.”
- But was the Law a means of grace? Yes. But by that I do not mean that men were saved by obeying the Law (Gal. 3:11, 21; Rom. 3:20a). If one is going to be saved by the Law, He must keep it perfectly (Gal. 5:3; Js. 2:10). Salvation has always and only ever been by grace (Gen. 15:6). But the Law did demonstrate to men that they were unable to obey and that they needed another means to be saved — so they trusted God to provide their atonement, believing that the sacrificial goat on the Day of Atonement would eventually culminate in God’s ultimate provision of salvation (Mt. 5:17-20).
- The Law is good, if one uses it “lawfully” according to its purpose (Rom. 7:12, 16; 1 Tim. 1:8).
- What good is the Law? How is the Law a manifestation of God’s grace?
 - ✓ The Law revealed God’s nature and moral will (Lev. 19)
 - ✓ The Law gave knowledge of sin and the extent of separation from God (Rom. 3:20; 7:5, 7).
 - ✓ The Law didn’t just reveal sin, but it condemned sin in sinners (Rom. 3:19; Is. 6:1ff).
 - ✓ Finally, the Law awakened men to their need of salvation (Gal. 3:23-24). Our flesh runs from condemnation of sin; our flesh fights for self-justification and self-righteousness. But only conviction of sin will awaken our awareness of our need for a Savior; as long as we believe we are not sinful or worthy of condemnation we will never desire Christ. But when we are

condemned by the Law of our sin, we will look to Christ — and the Law then becomes a means of God's grace to us.

"...grace is not antithetical to law, per se, for the moral law is a reflection of God's character and is a gift of his goodness. What grace opposes is men and women's futile attempts to gain God's favor by their own strivings." [Demarest, The Cross and Salvation, 87.]

- ✓ So knowing our sin and our need for salvation is a grace, because it drives us to Christ — and that's the next manifestation of God's grace.

3. **PARTICULAR Grace: God's Grace Revealed through CHRIST (vv. 16a, 17)**

- While common grace is sufficient to reveal God to men, only God's particular grace saves men.

"[Particular grace, or saving grace] is the irresistible work of God that frees men and women from the penalty and power of sin, renewing the inner person and sanctifying the sinner through the operation of the Holy Spirit. [MacArthur, The Truth About Grace, 10.]

- ✓ So when we talk about common grace, we mean good kindnesses that all people might enjoy — like protection by the police, pleasant weather, a well-cooked steak, or lower gas prices.
- ✓ But particular grace is the grace that puts men into fellowship with God and keeps them from experiencing God's wrath in eternity. Common grace makes all men comfortable on earth; only particular grace can make men comfortable in eternity.
- Earlier I said that Christ's advent was part of God's common grace — they *all* saw Him. That is true physiologically, but it is not true spiritually. Not everyone who saw Christ really saw Him (12:37-43). "There is a hiddenness to the display of glory in the incarnate Word..." [Carson]
- The greatest manifestation of God's grace is when God saves us from our sin and His wrath. And that is exactly the grace that came replacing and operating instead of the grace of the Law.
- So John says in v. 17, ***grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ***.
 - ✓ Again, grace existed in and through the Law (Ex. 34:6).
 - ✓ But the characteristics of God's grace became embodied in Christ at the incarnation (Heb. 3:1-6).
 - ✓ No one had seen God at any time (John 6:46), but when Christ came, He explained and revealed God and His grace (1:18). Grace then, "is the fountainhead of salvation..." [Demarest]
 - ✓ Saving grace means God gives salvation to undeserving sinners and enemies through Christ (Eph. 2:1-10). And that grace is available to all men (Tit. 2:11).
 - By grace we are elected to spiritual life (Eph. 1:3-6)
 - By grace we are effectively called to salvation (Gal. 1:15)

- By grace we are given faith and able to believe (Acts 18:27)
- By grace we are forgiven our sins (Eph. 1:7-8)
- By grace we are justified (Rom. 3:24; Tt. 3:7)
- By grace Christ absorbed the wrath of God on our behalf and imputed His righteousness to us (2 Cor. 5:21)
- By grace we are regenerated and given new life (1 Pt. 1:3)
- By grace we are progressively sanctified (2 Pt. 3:18; Rom. 6:11-23)
- By grace we are given spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6)
- By grace we are sustained spiritually and able to do righteous deeds (2 Cor. 12:9)
- By grace we are spiritually preserved into and throughout eternity (2 Tim. 2:1; Rom. 5:21)
- Everything we have and everything we do is only because of God's grace.

"We see a golden thread of grace moving through the whole of the Christian's history, from his election before all worlds, even to his admission to the heavenly rest." [Spurgeon]

CONCLUSION: Many years ago, I was rearranging some books on my bookshelf and found some binders that weren't being used behind my books. Elizabeth (who was six at the time) wanted them so she could play "school," so I gave them to her. A few days later, Raye Jeanne handed me a paper and said, "Look what Elizabeth has been doing."

In those binders Elizabeth had found some old papers from seminary. And she found a mid-term exam from a class I'd forgotten about and she "regraded it," turning an 83 B- into a 99 A (I was wondering why I didn't get a 100 from her). Despite her best intentions, she had no ability to affect my final grade or class standing.

Many people attempt to do the same things with their lives, re-grading their works on a sympathetic curve, supposing that God will agree with their grade. But just as the woman discovered from the photographer, there is an objective and firm reality that can't be changed.

But God's grace intervened. His common grace kept us alive until a time when we would repent. His common grace was further manifested in the Law, *graciously* condemning us of our sin. And His particular grace culminated in the Advent of Christ by whom we are saved.

Of His grace we have received, indeed. And in Christ we have one wondrous grace standing in place of another grace.