

Sermon
Ephesians 2:1-10

Grace
John 3:14-21

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Julian Templeton

We all want 'a good quality of life'. By a good quality of life we usually mean good health, enough money, and close relationships. Yet in most discussions about quality of life there is no mention of the one thing without which even good health, enough money and close relationships are not really good; and that is *grace*.

But what is grace? Grace is girl's name. Grace is something a very skilled dancer may be said to display in graceful movements. These are commonplace ways of using the word 'grace'. What used to be commonplace, but now seems to rather rare, is grace as a prayer of thanks to God said before a meal. We say Grace before meals at the Manse and it is interesting to see the reactions of lunch or dinner guests for whom this is apparently a very strange practice! Grace as thanks to God gets us closer but not yet to the heart of what grace is. Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians writes twice:

...it is by grace you have been saved... (2:5 & 2:8)

Whatever grace is, Paul believes it is that by which we are saved. And by 'saved' Paul seems to mean being brought from a kind of living death into a new fullness of life. The living death he describes as being:

...ruled by our physical desires, [doing] what instinct and evil imagination suggest. (2:3 REB)

We need only think of the power that an addiction has over a person—addiction to drink, drugs, pornography, or even Facebook—to realise what Paul is getting at when he describes

being ruled by desires and instincts we cannot control. I sing in a choir, and I have noticed a number of times that some of the basses sitting near to me are checking their smartphones during rehearsals! I suspect that they can't stop themselves from doing it. Indeed, a new phobia has in recent years been identified: the fear of being without one's mobile phone, so-called 'nomophobia'. Those addicted apparently exhibit psychological and physical symptoms of distress when parted from their mobile device. Of course, none of us here are afflicted by addictions, are we? We can quite happily go without tea or coffee for days on end and feel none the worse. We can quite easily stop worrying if we want to. We can go without television for a week. Or can we? Perhaps not! If we cannot then perhaps we too are addicted, even if the effect of our addiction is mild.

To be ruled by our desires is part of what Paul identifies as a kind of living death. However, Paul also identifies a mysterious thing called 'grace' that saves us from such a fate and brings us into a much fuller experience of life. And as he approaches this 'grace' he writes of two attributes of God that help us to understand what grace is. These two attributes are 'mercy' and 'love'.

But God is rich in mercy, and because of his great love for us, he brought us to life with Christ when we were dead because of our sins; it is by grace you are saved.

2:4-5 REB

God is said to be rich in mercy; he is abundantly merciful. To show mercy is voluntarily to offer to help or to pardon someone in a desperate state when there is no necessity to do so. It is to have power over someone else, but to use that power mercifully. For example, when a judge or ruler has the

right to pronounce a sentence of condemnation upon an accused person, but out of mercy for the accused suspends the sentence. It is when a person goes out of her way to help another person in genuine need. So God is rich in mercy, in Jesus Christ he forgives our sins, suspends our sentence, and does so as a voluntary act of compassion. It is the *voluntary* nature of God's mercy that is an expression of his grace. Grace is a *gift*.

Another attribute of God that opens a window into the nature of grace is his *love*. The author of the First Letter of John goes as far as to say 'God is love'. (1 John 4:16) This suggests that love guides everything that God does. Even when exercising judgement upon sin and evil, God does so as an expression of love. Indeed, his love guides his attitude to sin, as Paul seems to suggest:

...because of his great love for us, he brought us to life with Christ when we were dead because of our sins...
2:4b-5a

Because he loves us, not even our attempt to ignore God and live independently of God has prevented him from taking decisive action in Christ. When sin turns us inwards, making us preoccupied with self and unresponsive to God and our neighbour, God loves us so much that he takes the initiative. God uses Jesus Christ's voluntary action of dying on the cross as the sacrificial instrument of his love. God turns a misguided and hateful action against Jesus into a purposeful and loving action for us by resurrecting Jesus from death to new life after three days. In this way Jesus's prediction came to pass, "The Son of Man came...to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark ?) God has done all this *for us*, not because we are good or deserving but because *he loves us*. "God so loved *the*

world..." (John 3:16) not 'God so loved the good people' or 'God so loved the deserving people' but "God so loved the world..." meaning *all* people and *all* Creation. The *indiscriminate* nature of God's love is an expression of his grace. Grace is *undeserved*.

If, therefore, God's grace is an *undeserved gift*, then why doesn't everyone just receive it? Not everyone receives this undeserved gift because some try to *earn* God's grace by being deserving or by being good enough. I suppose one of the most common misconceptions I hear outside the Church, and sometimes within the Church, is that being a Christian is a matter of 'trying to be a good person.' Now, trying to be a good person is a laudable thing but it is not the same as being a Christian. Christians are those who have tried to be good, have failed, and realise that they cannot earn God's favour and therefore need God's grace, and come to worship week-by-week to access that grace alongside others. After all, we each have our own idea about what being 'a good person' is; but how good is good enough?

On this Mothering Sunday it is pertinent to ask, how does one become a good enough mother or a good enough father or a good enough friend? Isn't it the case that we often feel that we are not good enough when comparing ourselves with others? And if that is how we feel when comparing ourselves with others, how can we possibly be good enough when measuring ourselves against God's standard of absolute goodness and holiness? Christians are those who have come to realise that attempting to earn God's favour by being good enough is exhausting and ultimately impossible. The only way in which can be in right relationship with God is if we accept his undeserved gift of grace. His grace is the action, even when we were dead because of our sins, of bringing us to life with

Christ. Good works are not the cause but the *consequence* of being saved.

For it is 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.
2:8-10 NRSV

Grace is God's freely extended gift to us of new life in Jesus Christ, not because we deserve it but because God is merciful, loving, and gracious. God offers this gift to us irrespective of any consideration of worthiness or goodness in us but as pure grace. This pure grace of raising us to new life in Christ is in order that we may be what he has purposed in advance for us to be: created in Christ Jesus for a life of good works. Grace comes first; good works follow from grace.

There is just one means by which we receive this grace, and that is *faith*. "...it is by grace you have been saved through faith..." (2:8). The popular conception of faith both outside the Church, and sometimes also inside the Church, can misdirect us at this point. I've had people say to me "I wish I had your faith." In some cases his may be a genuine wish of a person who has tried to believe and has been unable to do so, but in other cases I wonder whether a person will not believe because he or she has closed himself or herself off from faith. At its simplest, faith is a trusting openness to the gift that God wants to give us. The radical idea that Paul communicates is that not only grace but *faith itself* is the gift of God:

...it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God... (2:8)

If not only grace but faith itself is the gift of God; all that God requires is trusting openness to this gift. But in order to receive God's gift of grace and faith we need to let go of what we are holding onto: we need to let go of a fixed view of oneself and the world, we need to let go of the childish belief in God that we long ago stopped believing in and open ourselves to the God who in Jesus Christ has demonstrated that he believes in us.

Friends, I invite you today to embrace the one thing that can direct your health, the use of your money, and the quality of your relationships towards what is truly good; and that is God's grace. When we are enlivened and energised by God's gracious gift of new life in Jesus Christ, we come to realise that our health, our money, and our relationships are not ours by right but come to us as God's generous gift, we will no longer yearn for what we don't have but will be thankful for what we do have.

Thanks be to God.