

**Date:** 25 February 2024  
**Services:** *Across the Diocese*  
**Series:** Gazing on the Goodness of God  
**Title:** Gracious  
**Passage:** Exodus 34:4-7; John 1:14-18

Welcome to week two of our Lenten studies on the goodness of God, and our theme this week is "God is gracious." The grace of God.

I love the story of the family organizing their trip to Disney World. This family had three children. Their middle daughter, let's call her Sally, was adopted, and her previous foster family was a loving family, but they never really integrated her into their biological family. Every year, Sally's previous family would go to Disney World, but every year, Sally would be left behind with family friends. So she'd heard about Disney World and seen photos but had never actually been there.

When her new family announced that they were taking the family to Disney World, Sally immediately assumed that she was not going to go, and suddenly, her behaviour started to change. She started to lie and become disobedient, stole money, and Tim, the dad, took Sally aside for a fatherly chat.

He said, "Sally, what is going on?" Sally said, "I know exactly what you're going to do. You're going to take the rest of the family to Disney, but I'm not going to go, am I?" The thought never crossed his mind, and suddenly, her bad behaviour made sense because she tried being good, but she'd never been taken to Disney World. She thought, "Well, if I'm as bad as I possibly can be, then that's okay. I don't deserve to go to Disney World."

The easy response of a father, and I think this is what most parents often do, is to say, "Well, no, you don't deserve to go. Unless you change your behaviour, unless you act differently, you're not going to go to Disney World." But here's what Tim said; he extended grace. He looked at Sally and said these words, "Is this trip something we're doing as a family?" She nodded through her tear-filled brown eyes, "And are you part of this family now?" "Yes," she said. "Well, in that case, of course, you're coming to Disney World. It's not about what you've done or haven't done. You're just part of this family now."

In the hotel room after the first day at Disney World, as Sally cuddled next to a stuffed unicorn, she snuggled up to Tim, her dad, and said these incredible words, "Daddy, I finally got to go to Disney World, but it wasn't because I was good; it was because I'm yours. It wasn't because I'm good; it's because I'm yours." And that is the message of outrageous grace, isn't it? It's not a favour that we can achieve by being good; it's a gift we receive because we just belong to God. It's not what we get for being good; it's what we get because of who God is. God is gracious. God is outrageously gracious. That's His character, and the ground of God's grace is that He just delights in us. We're His treasured possession. We're His precious children (Proverbs 1:9). They're a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck. It's like a jewel, like a diamond that's precious. That's how God sees us.

You may not understand that God sees you as treasured and loved, known and precious. You're wanted. Here's a simple definition of grace: grace is God's costly, undeserved favour. God's costly, undeserved favour.

That word "favour" is a beautiful word. Favour is normally someone of a higher status looking on someone of a lower status and treating them with unexpected kindness, someone superior stooping low in kindness to one who's inferior. So when Jacob was returning to meet Esau after 20 years away, the last time he saw his brother, he had lied and stolen his birthright and his blessing, and Jacob is not asking what is fair; he's asking for favour. That's the word (Genesis 39).

We're told that Joseph found favour in the eyes of Potiphar. He was the lowly servant, and Potiphar was the wealthy boss, but Potiphar showed kindness to Joseph. That's grace. Now we are the creatures; we're not the Creator. We are the lowly ones; God is the superior, glorious one. We're told in 2 Corinthians chapter 8, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor so that you, through his poverty, might become rich." That is grace, God stooping low (John 1:14). The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

I love this quote by Max Lardo: "Our Saviour kneels down and gazes upon the darkest acts of our lives. But rather than recall in horror, He reaches out in kindness and says, 'I can clean that if you want.' And from the basin of His grace, He scoops a palm full of mercy, and He washes our sin. That is grace - God stooping low to bless us in ways that we never imagine and don't deserve. It's God's costly, undeserved favour."

The word "undeserved" - remember in Exodus, Moses is up the mountain, and he's receiving the Ten Commandments. He's encountering God. And what are God's people doing? They're down the mountain, and they're building a golden calf, and they're dancing around this golden calf. They deserve nothing; they deserve punishment. But what do they get? They get grace and favour. That's the thing about grace: you can't earn it; you don't deserve it.

You know if you work an 8-hour day, you receive a wage because you've earned that. If you compete and perform better than other people, you get a medal or a prize because you've won that. If you achieve something outstanding, you receive a reward because you deserve that. But what if you're not capable of earning a wage or able to win a prize or deserve any award, but you got one anyway? It's the most extraordinary, expensive, undeserved gift. That is grace - we can't demand it; we don't earn it; we're not worthy of it. It's completely undeserved, and it's costly. It cost us nothing, but it cost God everything.

I hope you understand that grace is a uniquely Christian word. Grace is what makes us Christian. You know you can make yourself a Buddhist, you can make yourself a Muslim, but you can't make yourself a Christian. Only grace can do that. Here's a verse I love, 1 Peter 5:10, "And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ after you've suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast." So God calls us into His eternal glory by His grace - that's called saving grace. God will restore us, tune us up, chip away at us - that's called His sanctifying grace. And God will keep us for glory - that's called His sustaining grace. The Christian Life starts with grace, continues with grace, and ends with grace.

Martin Lord Jones says, "Everything is of grace in the Christian Life from beginning to the end."

Look at three aspects of God's grace: His Saving grace, His sanctifying grace, and His sustaining grace.

### **1. His Saving grace**

I'm sure you know the old hymn, "Amazing grace," how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, I'm blind, but now I see. And we live with this constant tension that yes, we are a sinner, and yet we're saved by grace. And we've got to always be amazed about that. I'm still amazed after 33 years of being a Christian that God should save me by His grace. But when you understand grace, you've got to acknowledge that you are a sinner in need of that grace.

The classic passage, Ephesians chapter 2, and this is not a picture of a particularly decadent society, this is just every human being without Jesus. Ephesians 2, verse 1 - let me read it for you: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world, under the rule of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like

the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath." That's our condition - we were dead, spiritually dead, incapable of a relationship with our Creator, dead in our transgressions and our sins.

The word "transgressions" means that you've overstepped a boundary, like a javelin thrower who just oversteps the line - it's a foul throw. The word "sin" means that you've missed the target, like an archer whose arrow falls short of the target - that is us. We're not perfect; we don't live perfect lives. All of us do or say things that are not good and not right. And this passage says that we were enslaved - we were enslaved by the world, the flesh, and the devil, and we gratified the cravings of our flesh. We fed that. grace is undeserved, but verse 4, Ephesians 2, verse 4, a big "but" - because of God's great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made you alive with Christ, even when you were dead in your transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved. By grace, you have been saved.

God did that, not us. We are the objects; He is the giver of grace. We are the recipients; we're the lonely ones. God is the superior one who lavishes us with His grace - unconditional, undeserved. God, who is rich in Mercy, full of Mercy, shows kindness by giving us grace.

Now, Church, if you believe in Jesus, then you have been saved by grace. grace is a relational word. You've been saved from death, saved from slaveries of the world, the flesh, and the devil, saved from wrath and condemnation, and you're with Christ. Sometimes people say, "Paul, that sounds so arrogant to say that you've been saved." It's not arrogant; it's confidence. I don't think I've done anything to deserve it. It's all down to God.

Imagine that you're in massive debt, and you're in half a million dollars worth of debt, and someone comes and gives you a half a million dollars and says, "This is all for you to go and cancel your debts. Do nothing, just reach out and take it; it's yours." And so you take the money and you pay off your debt, and you're debt-free. Let me ask you, what do you boast about? Do you go around bragging about the fact that you had the power and the skill to reach out and take that money? Of course, you don't. You just received it as an undeserved gift. That is grace, nothing more, nothing less. You were in debt, and God paid your debt, and you just receive it and say thank you. What's the catch? There is no catch.

I love the story of the true story of these two men in church, in a rural church on a Sunday morning. One is a high court judge, and the other is a known criminal. They're both kneeling together at a communion rail at the end of the service. The minister says to the high court judge, "Did you see who was kneeling next to you at the communion rail that morning?" "Oh, I did," he said, "what a walking miracle of grace." And the minister says, "He is, isn't he?" And the judge said, "I'm not talking about the criminal; I'm talking about me. I'm the walking miracle of grace. You know, this criminal next to me, he knew that he'd done things wrong, and grace for him was this gift that he was easy to accept. But for me, I was born into a rich home, educated at Oxford University, trained as a lawyer, and in God's grace and kindness, He reached out to me and opened my eyes to Jesus. I'm the walking miracle of grace. That's what grace does to you; it keeps you humble; it reminds you that we are deserving of nothing. We're not better than anybody else, and we're not worse than anybody. It's a great equalizer.

My longing for the Anglican church and the global church is that we be a church gripped by grace - a church where there's no hierarchy, where everyone is treated equally regardless of age, stage, gender, sexuality, intellect, theological qualifications. A church where there's no hint of pride or self-importance, no one strutting around thinking they are somebody in the church. A church where there's no legalism, no rules that make people feel so bad or so good about themselves. A church where there's no boasting about our good works or how many hours we give to God, as though somehow we can contribute towards our salvation. A church where we celebrate other churches, not pull them down, not comparing ourselves. A church where there are no silly titles like "The Reverend Dr. Paul Dale." We're all equal in God's sight. A church where no one has low self-esteem. Please stop looking down on yourself; because you are loved and chosen by God.

It's by grace we've been saved, but grace isn't just about your salvation; it's about your sanctification. So:

## **2. Sanctifying grace.**

God loves you just as you are, but He loves you too much to leave you as you are. John Newton, who wrote that hymn "Amazing grace," said these famous words: "I'm not what I ought to be. Oh, how imperfect and deficient. I'm not what I wish to be. I abhor what is evil, and I would cleave to what is good. I'm not what I hope to be. Soon and soon shall I put off mortality and with mortality, all sin and imperfection. Yet, though I'm not what I ought to be, nor what I wish to be, nor what I hope to be, I can truly say, I'm not what I once was - a slave to sin and Satan. And I can heartily join with the Apostle in acknowledging, by the grace of God, I am what I am." That is sanctifying grace.

Grace, the grace that transforms us day by day, chips away at us day by day. We're like waxwork models, a lump of wax, and God is chipping away by His grace as His scalpel in His hand, sculpting us to be more like Christ.

Titus, Chapter 2, verse 11: "For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It's grace teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age." I still remember the first time I understood those verses. I'd been a Christian for many, many years, but if I'm honest, I was tired, weary, and worn out because I was trying to live my Christian life by works, not by grace. I understood I'd been saved by grace, but I was living by works. I had post-it notes all around my room with verses from the Bible and lists of what I should do and what I must do and what I couldn't do. To be honest, it was exhausting, and I was just burdened. Then I read Titus, Chapter 2, and it was like this aha moment. I understood verse 12. It teaches us. What's the "it" there? Grace teaches you. Grace is your ongoing teacher who trains you, empowers you, and equips you.

What does it mean for grace to teach me? It's just the most amazing moment where you realize that every single day, grace is going to be what transforms you. Yes, of course, you're called to do your works, but it is empowered by grace, and that is liberating. When your heart is amazed by grace, you realize what you've been saved from; you don't want to go back there, but you want to be transformed day by day, hour by hour, week by week, month by month, to be more like Christ. That is a work of grace, a sanctifying grace. Grace teaches you to say no to ungodliness. There are all the things in your life that are tempting to do that you know are wrong. It says no to worldly passions, anger, hatred. Grace teaches you to say no to that. Positively, it says yes to godliness, self-control, upright godly lives. Verse 12 - it's that positive living, not just saying yes, not just knowing the right thing, but doing it and living it. Please don't think you have to stop doing things. Grace teaches you to start doing the good things, the new things, the right things. It's sanctifying.

Here's the key: don't write lists of things you must do or must not do; that is legalism. Don't come with your schemes and plans; that is fickle. Don't despair that you will never change because God can change you. God changes you by His grace. Here's the key, listening - the Puritan called it the power of the new affections. The more you see Jesus and His glory and allow Him to transform you, the more you'll be liberated, and you'll say, "Praise God for His sanctifying grace."

Finally, as we close,

## **3. God's sustaining grace.**

It's that grace to stand firm and be strong. When you feel weak, it's that grace that keeps you going in the Christian life. "Through many toils, dangers, and snares, I have already come. It is grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

2 Corinthians 12 is a beautiful passage where Paul talks about his thorn and his flesh. "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me," he says, "but God said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' My grace is sufficient, and I love that. God's grace is sufficient to sustain you everywhere you go, every situation, every circumstance.

God may not give you gold, but He will give you grace. He will comfort you, provide for you, protect you, and give you not everything you want, not everything you need, but give you His grace to sustain you through every season and every trial of life. We are weak, but in our weakness, we experience His sustaining grace. I'm not really into tattoos, but if I could have one tattoo, I think I would have James 4:6. It says this, "But God gives us more grace."

Our God is full of grace. Let's praise Him for that.