

“Graciously Accepted”

Romans 5 & Matthew 5:21-30, 48

Pastor James York

October 30, 2022

Prayer for Understanding Gracious Creator of the cosmos and everything in it, we are not sure we know what to do with a love we did not earn. So, startle us again with the good news of your steadfast, everlasting love of everyone. Amen

Today is Reformation Sunday when we celebrate the rediscovery of God’s grace. Pastor John Buchanan gives a concise overview of a few aspects of the reformation. “Reformation Sunday is a time to reflect on who we are, where we came from, who we aspire to be and what we most deeply believe. The Protestant Reformation was part of an intellectual, political, and cultural upheaval in Europe. It was about religion, and it was about emerging nation states, political freedom, the radical new notion of the human person as autonomous, created to be free, bearing the image of God, and given responsibility for the conduct of his or her own life. And it was about a basic belief about God and God’s relationship to the world and to every individual human being.”

Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk, a priest, and a scholar. Luther was also terrified. Like most of the people of his age, he believed that the deck was stacked against him. Life was short and brutal. Over it all was a stern, judgmental God, an angry, fearsome God. At the end, there was a hell of eternal torment. A person’s only hope was to make some kind of peace with that angry God. Life for many people, Luther among them, was an unhappy struggle to be good enough and to do enough good to persuade God to be less angry and perhaps assign your soul to heaven after an appropriate time in purgatory. The church held the keys. Luther was consumed with trying to please God—“to get to a gracious God,” he put it. Luther prayed, fasted, and went on pilgrimages, even inflicted pain on himself by flagellation, did a pilgrimage to Rome to reinforce his trust in God, and climbed up the long staircase on his knees. Nothing worked.

It was in his monk’s cell, at his desk, preparing a series of lectures on Paul’s Letter to the Romans that the moment of understanding happened.” **Romans 5 NLT** “Therefore, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God’s glory. We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because God has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with God’s love. When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed God’s great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ, Jesus will certainly save us from God’s condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of Jesus while we were still God’s enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of Jesus. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God. When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam’s sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. Yes, people sinned even before the law was given. But it was not counted as sin because there was not yet any law to break. Still, everyone died—from the time of Adam to the time of Moses—even those who did not disobey an explicit commandment of God, as Adam did. Now Adam is a symbol, a representation of Christ, who was yet to come. But there is a great difference between Adam’s sin and God’s gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God’s wonderful grace and God’s gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. And the result of God’s gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man’s sin. For Adam’s sin led to condemnation, but God’s free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins. For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God’s wonderful grace and God’s gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ. Yes, Adam’s one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ’s one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed

God, many will be made righteous. God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant. So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

"Luther said it was as if the truth in all its fullness burst upon him and the gates of paradise flew open. The church had it all backwards. You don't have to persuade God to be gracious by praying, by attending masses, by going to confession, by fasting and self-flagellating. God is already gracious. You don't have to persuade God to be loving. God already loves. God is love. God sent the only begotten son not to condemn, but to save because of love."

That simple realization shook the foundation not only of the medieval church but all of society. God is good. God is merciful and kind. People don't have to live in fear, dreading the end of life. Instead, people who know the good news can live in peace with God, in gratitude and in joy. Luther's new faith, and new church built on it, were not full of guilt and fear, rather confidence and joy.

For the most part these issues no longer divide Protestants and Catholics today. Catholic theologians teach Luther and Calvin as well as Thomas Aquinas. If we cannot share the Lord's Supper yet, some day we will.

It was the sale of indulgences that sent Luther over the top. Indulgences were issued by the church and promised forgiveness and a reduced time in purgatory. You could buy indulgences for yourself or your departed relatives. Salesman traveled from town to town hawking indulgences on the street corner.

When the salesmen came to Wittenberg, where Luther was a theology professor, he went to his study and wrote out a theological critique of indulgences and the entire system whereby the church seemed to be offering access to God's grace by good works, praying, fasting, alms giving and purchasing indulgences. Luther had a lot to say. He wrote ninety-five critiques, or theses, marched down to the castle church doors in Wittenberg, nailed the theses to the door with an offer to debate them with anyone. The rest is history. The church excommunicated Martin Luther, persuaded the Holy Roman Emperor to condemn him as a heretic, put a price on his head. Luther went into hiding at the Castle of Wartburg, the "Mighty Fortress" where he spent his time translating the Bible into German so people could read and understand for themselves. Luther's thinking spread throughout Germany, the Low Countries, France, Switzerland, and Great Britain.

A French lawyer, John Calvin, was drawn to Luther's thought, was a refugee from France, settled in Geneva, and created a whole new way of being the church, a representative democracy, itself a radical new concept based on the autonomy and rights of individuals. Calvin became the intellectual driving force of the Reformation and the father of Presbyterians. Calvin wrote a hymn in 1551: "I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art." Luther thought the gates of paradise opened when he finally realized that God was gracious and loving. Calvin would write, "Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness, No harshness hast thou and no bitterness, O grant us the grace we find in thee That we may dwell in perfect unity!" The Reformation represented a new way of thinking about God and what it means to be a faithful person.

Luther was not the first person in history to experience a sense of incompleteness, dislocation, anxiety, fear, estrangement, and certainly not the last. It seems to be part of who we are as human beings: theologians, psychologists, artists, and poets express it in their own idiom. To be a human is to yearn for wholeness, yearn to be at home in the world, at home with oneself. The Bible puts it in terms of being exiled from the perfection of the garden, forever homesick for that original God-given security and peace.

The Reformers having been transformed by grace in gratitude strived to provide ways for everyone to experience grace. They translated the Bible into the common language of the people. The first book printed on the printing press was the Bible. The second was the Mainz Psalter. Unfortunately, most people were illiterate, so the reformers strived to provide education for all. The Reformation is the birth place of public education for all and education for girls. The hope was that everyone would be able to discover God's grace in the Bible and then live in gratitude creating a gracious society. The reformers invested in higher education for pastors to teach the Bible. People needed to be free to read the Bible and discover grace for themselves. Up until this time most low income people were considered to belong to a King and were expected to believe whatever the king believed. So, the Reformers organized communities as democracies and advocated for freedom for all. Presbyterians are the creators of representative democracy to be implemented in both church government and countries. People needed to have food, shelter, clothing, and health care to more effectively read about God's grace in scripture so more resources were dedicated to human wellbeing.

"Paul Tillich was educated in philosophy at the best German universities, a chaplain in the German Army during the First World War, an early opponent of Hitler's National Socialism, he was asked to leave Germany and

spent the rest of his life teaching in America at Union Theological Seminary, Harvard, and the University of Chicago. Tillich was legendary for the difficulty of his thought.

And when Tillich preached, he produced simple, elegant, straightforward sermons. His sermon on the text from Romans 5 is a Christian classic: “You Are Accepted.” He had witnessed the pure, unadulterated evil of Nazism. He had learned from the Freudians the dark side of human consciousness. He had many personal, private struggles, demons, and infidelities. Tillich concluded that the human problem is that we are separated from the self God created us to be, separated from other people, and, finally, ultimately separated from God. And so we spend our lives trying to make ourselves acceptable, trying to find our way home. “Our hope,” Tillich said, not far from Luther five centuries before, “is that God is gracious and kind and comes to us and accepts us as we are.” Many of us do spend our lives trying to earn approval—the approval of parents, long after they are gone, the approval of teachers, mentors, self-approval, and the approval of God. “Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness,” Tillich said. “Grace strikes us when we walk through the dark reality of a meaningless and empty life. Grace strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life,” which he did. And then the great philosopher, the flawed intellectual giant, became simply, clearly confessional in a way that has resonated with thousands and thousands: Sometimes a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as if a voice were saying, ‘You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now: perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; later you will do much. . . . Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything, do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.’ “We cannot compel anyone to accept himself or herself,” Tillich wrote. “But sometimes it happens that we receive power to say, ‘yes’ to ourselves, that peace enters into us and makes us whole—grace has come upon us.” That is what happened to Luther in the midst of his lifelong struggle to make himself acceptable.”

Pastor John said: “And it was the turning point for me when I finally got it: that being a Christian is not about being good enough so that God can love you, but being grateful that God already loves you; not about guilt and fear of ultimate rejection, but joy and peace because of God’s unconditional love. Grace was a turning point for me when I finally got it that God is merciful and kind, full of grace, compassion, and forgiveness and wants from me—and from you and from all of us—lives lived in joyful gratitude. Grace is why so many people, even people who don’t go to church or believe much of anything, love an old gospel hymn, “Amazing Grace.” It was written in 1779, by a British sea captain, John Newton, a slave trader. He described what happened to him unforgettably: “I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see.” And then, a crystal clear confession of a truth about God and all of us, even you and me: Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come: ’Tis grace has bought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.”

As a lifelong active Presbyterian, I have been taught about the grace of God from birth. The doctrine of prevenient grace declares that it all begins with grace, before faith, before a decision, before one is even able to think, God’s grace makes all possible. By the 90s, I was ordained a ruling elder, a volunteer youth minister, presbytery commissioner, Sunday School teacher, and a member of three weekly Bible Studies. I am still not sure how I ended up in one for I was the only non-pastor, the other members were the Hudson pastors of the Presbyterian, Baptist, and Episcopalian churches. When Leslie and I went to premarriage coaching, my lengthy theology debates with the Roman Catholic priest resulted in us being reassigned to another priest. I was passionate in finding the truth, the right understanding of scripture, so I could live truth and teach truth.

At the Deep Freeze Retreat I was studying the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said: **Matthew 5:21-30, 48 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a sibling, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a sibling, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire. Be perfect as God is perfect.”** I was contemplating the depth of my sin. A negative thought is the equivalent of murder. I am to be perfect. In addition, there is cooperate sin, if anyone in the world is oppressed, hungry, unloved, I am guilty.

Suddenly a wonderful, inspiring, freeing wave of grace embraced me. Jesus knew that none of the people could live his teachings. And yet, Jesus taught and died for each of us, so every shortcoming can be washed away and every goodness preserved forever, so every moment is a fresh start, every sin forgiven, left in the past, every good option possible. Suddenly, I experienced grace that is far more magnificent than words can portray. I realized that the most important gift to share, teach, and strive to model is grace. The next day, I decided to dedicate my life to sharing grace.

You are graciously accepted. Amen

