

Say Goodnight Gracie ZCC 4/17/16

Ephesians 2:4-10 (GW) **4** *But God is rich in mercy because of his great love for us. 5 We were dead because of our failures, but he made us alive together with Christ. (It is God's kindness or grace that saved you.) 6 God has brought us back to life together with Christ Jesus and has given us a position in heaven with him. 7 He did this through Christ Jesus out of his generosity to us in order to show his extremely rich kindness in the world to come. 8 God saved you through faith as an act of kindness. You had nothing to do with it. Being saved is a gift from God. 9 It's not the result of anything you've done, so no one can brag about it. 10 God has made us what we are. He has created us in Christ Jesus to live lives filled with good works that he has prepared for us to do.*

In my other life, I work in a clinical world that has lots of acronyms and abbreviations and terms that no one else uses or even understands. If you go into our database and look at a referral, it might say something like this: 47yo AA Male, NR. PMH: HTN, uncontrolled DM. MVC, CHI, SDH. NBD, BOV only. Labs WNL. FC/FT.

You get all that? I know I didn't 12-13 years ago, but now I can tell you that this is a 47 year old, African American male who is not on the donor registry. He has a history of hypertension and uncontrolled diabetes. He was involved in a motor vehicle crash and has a closed head injury with a subdural hematoma. He is not brain dead, but his only brainstem reflex is breathing over the ventilator. His labs are within normal limits and he is a full-code/full-treat.

What I've found is that often the medical team has a hard time communicating clearly with families who have no medical training and have no idea what all these terms are. As a result, families are often confused and even angry that they can't understand what is happening. Part of my job is to spend enough time and enough energy to help families understand complicated medical procedures and terms—no matter what their level of education or experience in the medical world.

All industries and groups seem to develop a kind of “short hand” that helps them communicate with each other. Those are helpful. If you go back to my original referral—it took a paragraph to write out what was short-handed in just a few abbreviations and insider terms.

But whether we are dealing with a medical team or highway engineers, or the information-services help-desk—we outsiders struggle and often get frustrated with our inability to understand what they mean.

Christians and churches are not exempt from doing something very similar.

One of the things churches get bashed over is our use of religious language—language which is not easily understood by those who are not a part of our tradition. I agree, although I know that we have gotten better. We used to even think that God only heard prayers prayed in King James' English—at least it seemed that way. We used to hear a lot of sermons that contained the terms, “sanctified, glorified, and justified” without any explanation as to what they meant. (Parody a preacher mopping his brow and using those terms—“Brothers and sisters, if you want to get into paradise, if you want to meet the Lord Jesus face to face, you've got to be sanctified, justified, and glorified...” We have over-used the term “anointed” in the same way—again, without explanation.

As our language changes and as we change—even we who are “insiders” can lose the true meanings of those religious terms. If we can begin to lose the definitions, then you know that others have done so. I believe that part of my job here is to help us understand, to remind us of how our relationship to God works and one way to do that is to explain those terms that we hear so often and yet sometimes fail to REALLY understand.

From that premise, this morning I am going to talk about grace and forgiveness and mercy. These are favorite subjects of Christians around the world—and they ought to be, we wouldn't be Christians without them. In fact, with just a short “Christian” explanation of these three terms—grace, mercy, and forgiveness—you have the entire plan of salvation.

Springing from the love of God--grace and mercy were brought to bear on our world by the sending of the Christ—God-in-the-flesh—to be born and grow up and walk and talk and teach and suffer and die in the form and being of Jesus of Nazareth.

Rising again to new life, he brought mercy and grace to completion and perfection in forgiveness. Now, through Jesus' salvific work--true and total forgiveness is available to all who will call on his name.

Do we really understand the concept of God's grace? We sometimes look at the life situations of others and say, “there but for the grace of God, go I.” We say “grace” at the table from time to time. When God gets hold of it, grace is not just a simple word. In God's hand, grace is a wonderful thing.

The best definition I ever heard for grace is very short. I'll tell you in a minute—but let me first ask you—what is your definition of grace? [WAIT] (Unmerited favor.)

Grace is not something that comes with deserving or merit or work. God's grace, God's forgiveness does not hinge on our worthiness. It hinges on the love of God.

Titus 3:3-7. ³ For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, and wrong. We were slaves to passions and pleasures of all kinds. We spent our lives in malice and envy; others hated us and we hated them. ⁴ But when the kindness and love of God our Savior was revealed, ⁵ he saved us. It was not because of any good deeds that we ourselves had done, but because of his own mercy that he saved us, through the Holy Spirit, who gives us new birth and new life by washing us. ⁶ God poured out the Holy Spirit abundantly on us through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that by his grace we might be put right with God and come into possession of the eternal life we hope for.

In this letter, Paul is very clear about salvation and grace—in verse 5, it says that God saved us, not because of the good things we did—but because of his grace or mercy. In verse 7 it says that God has declared us not guilty because of his own kindness—not because we deserved it. (Maybe you'd like to say “yes Lord” or “amen” or even “thank you”.)

If you are a child of God--headed for heaven instead of hell, subject to God's love and mercy instead of his wrath—then it is by his grace and by the sacrifice of Christ. (Amen!)

Ephesians 2:4-10: God's mercy is so abundant, and his love for us is so great, ⁵ that while we were spiritually dead in our disobedience he brought us to life with Christ. It is by God's grace that you have been saved. ⁶ In our union with Christ Jesus he raised us up with him to rule with him in the heavenly world. ⁷ He did this to demonstrate for all time to come the extraordinary greatness of his grace in the love he showed us in Christ Jesus. ⁸⁻⁹ 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. ¹⁰ God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus he has created us for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do.

Again—unmerited favor. While we were DEAD in sins—God made life eternal available to us through Christ! If we didn't understand what God's grace is all about, verses 8 and 9 would make it perfectly clear, wouldn't they? Who gets the credit for our salvation? (God) What did we do to deserve it? (nothing)

How about it—could the idea of God’s grace be any clearer to you? Is there any way I can make it more simple or more understandable? OK then, back to our earlier definition. What is God’s grace?

(Unmerited favor.)

I won’t go into a great long discussion of mercy as it pertains to God—I’ll just say that God was merciful when he chose not to wipe out all of creation when sin first entered in. It was that same mercy that brought about the grace I’ve been talking about the last few minutes.

It is a merciful God, indeed, who grants the means of grace to all who will accept it.

Of course, if the object of God’s grace is the human race--the purpose of God’s grace is forgiveness. A merciful God graciously formulated a plan—and carried it out—so that all who accept his gift will receive forgiveness.

The Bible has some things to say about forgiveness also.

My favorite verse on God’s forgiveness is I John 1:9. *“but if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us of every wrong.”*

Two verses before, we are told that if we are living in the light of the presence of God, then the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.

So, let me do a bit of recapping—today, I have done a little review work. Kind of like we used to do in school. Before a test, we would review—so that we would be ready.

Today, we have reviewed the plan and the reality of salvation. I didn’t discuss the fall—partly because we already know that we are a fallen race. We are not perfect and cannot approach a perfect God on our own.

I have talked about the love of God that brought grace to bear on the lives and hearts of us sinners—and brought us forgiveness and salvation. Grace is free. It came to us because God loved us while we were still sinners. Through the life and work and resurrection of Jesus Christ—you and I have (or can) receive forgiveness for our sins and gain a relationship to God forever and ever.

You might guess that I had a reason for all this review work. First, I want us to remember and remember well the greatness of God’s salvation. Then, there is something I want us to do about it.

Let me begin this part of the message by reminding you and me about the lawyer who came to Jesus and asked him what was the most important commandment. Do you remember the answer? Who can paraphrase it? (Love God with mind, soul, spirit—and neighbor as yourself).

How often should we, the children of God, be gracious and forgive? As often as it is needed—just as God does for us.

The Bible says Judge not, lest what? [lest ye be judged.]

In New Testament scripture, there is a clear indication of how God see our relationships to others and how he feels about our tendency to hold grudges. If you had to summarize what Jesus told Peter about forgiving, what would you say? [Forgive 70 x 7, which means as often as needed—OR—forgive always.]

Worship is important, but relationships to each other are so important that Jesus encouraged us to skip worship in a specific situation and do something else instead. It can be found in Matthew 5:23-24

He told us to do something if our relationship with our neighbor is messed up. Who remembers what that was?

So if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God.

We say the model prayer each week during communion. What does it say about relationships? After the “Lord’s Prayer” in Matthew—immediately after—Jesus says in verses 14 and 15, “*for if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you...But if you forgive them not, your Father will not forgive you.*”

Tough stuff.

It gets worse. I’m about to read you the scariest passage in the Bible—and I know this is not the first time I’ve shared this. I continue to share it because it is clear that Jesus cares how we treat others and how we are in relationship with them.

If you didn’t know there was any scary stuff in the Bible—you will learn something today. You will learn my pick for the scariest verses in scripture.

Matt 18:21-34:

²¹Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?” ²²“No, not seven times,” answered Jesus, “but seventy times seven,^[a]²³ because the Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a king who decided to check on his servants’ accounts. ²⁴He had just begun to do so when one of them was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. ²⁵The servant did not have enough to pay his debt, so the king ordered him to be sold as a slave, with his wife and his children and all that he had, in order to pay the debt. ²⁶The servant fell on his knees before the king. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay you everything!’ ²⁷The king felt sorry for him, so he forgave him the debt and let him go. ²⁸“Then the man went out and met one of his fellow servants who owed him a few dollars. He grabbed him and started choking him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he said. ²⁹His fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!’ ³⁰But he refused; instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt. ³¹When the other servants saw what had happened, they were very upset and went to the king and told him everything. ³²So he called the servant in. ‘You worthless slave!’ he said. ‘I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. ³³You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you.’ ³⁴The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount.”

I don’t know what all to make of this passage. (Recap the story)

Still, as I end this message, let me encourage each of us to a couple of things.

First, let's take a look at our hearts and lives. If you have never accepted the gracious offer that God has made of forgiveness and salvation—please do it today. The work has been done. It is a free gift.

Second—if you HAVE accepted it and are a child of God—I encourage you to really think about what God has done. God has saved you. God has delivered you. God has forgiven you. All this out of love for you when you were unlovable. See, God's love and grace and forgiveness didn't come after we deserved it, but it came while we were still in rebellion and while we were active sinners.

Third—I want to remind you and me how much importance Jesus, the Son of God, placed on our relationships to others. So much so, that he encouraged us to put feet on our relationships and forgiveness and to go there first—before we worship. God wants our worship—so relationships MUST be important to put that priority on them.

Jesus even equated our forgiveness of others with God's willingness to continue forgiving us.

Again, I don't understand this very well. AND the story of the servant and the Lord scares me to death.

Fourth—I want you to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you right now. Listen. Listen. Listen.

This is a hard question—one that seldom gets asked from the pulpit—and one we seldom ask ourselves.

I normally speak in “us” and “we” and talk about how “we” should respond to God's word and his Spirit corporately. I'm going to make an exception today. Salvation and relationship is an individual experience. Those things are about you and me individually—not about us.

Should YOU be right here right now—or should you be at someone's house asking and giving forgiveness?

What relationships are getting in the way of you and God? What relationships in your life need to be fixed? Listen closely to that still small voice.

I'm afraid most of us heard something, didn't we? What are you and I going to do about it? Are we going to act or are we going to stand the judgment for it? Are we going to act or let it stand between us and God?

Are we going to act or allow those broken relationships to stand in the way of God's will in our hearts and in our church and in our community?

In our relationships—to God and to others—we need to get rid of the pride and experience a sense of brokenness, a sense of need—a sense of that kind of love God has for you and for me.