

“GRACE: CONNECT THE DOTS (#1): PREVENIENT GRACE”

(Romans 2:4; 5:6-11)

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[PROPS NEEDED: (#1) “*Father’s Love Letter*” SermonSpice Video Clip;
(#2) “Grandpa Pooh” stuff animal on top of stool in preaching area]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 3-1-09]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read NRSV Text: Romans 2:4; 5:6-11 and Pray.
2. [Sing Verse 1 of “*Amazing Grace*” (UMH#378)]... For the past 2000 years, Christians have *sung* about it, *preached* about it, read about it in the Bible, and in fact, it’s the very reason that we’re even here today in church.

A–What is it? ...It’s the GRACE of God.

B–And yet, even though (in Christian circles) we hear and talk about it all the time, I find that far too many of us don’t really understand what it is.

C–That’s why, over the next five weeks (during the Christian season known as Lent),¹ we’re going to be focusing on the grace of God – using our time together to “*Connect The Dots*” (if you will) between WHAT God’s grace is, WHY we need it, & HOW its various forms/manifestations function in our lives both to bring us *to* salvation & to help us grow *in* it (*Invite all to follow along in bulletin sermon notes...*).

3. You know, in the Bible, the word that we translate as “grace” is the Greek word *charis*, and it literally means “*unmerited favor*”² – in this case, the “*unmerited favor of God*”

A–Perhaps you’ve heard it said that grace is “*When we get what we don’t deserve, and when we don’t get what we do deserve.*”

B–But you say, “*Preacher, I’m a basically good person. I don’t do drugs, or cheat on my spouse, or go kill people. So why do I need this ‘unmerited favor of God’ in my life?*”

4. Well, to answer that we first need to understand something about WHY we are the way we are as human beings, and I’m going to use “Grandpa Pooh” (my wife’s favorite stuffed animal growing up) to help me illustrate this.

A–In Gen.1:26, God says “*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.*”

1–[HUG “GRANDPA POOH” ON STOOL] In other words, we humans were originally created in the *perfect* image of God – to have a perfect union with Him, with an inherent God-centeredness about all we said/did, to instinctively love everyone and always do the right thing.

2–Now, we all know that we’re not this way now, right? So what happened?

B–Well, Genesis 3 says because of the sin of Adam and Eve (called the “Fall”), this perfect image of God in each of us was broken and corrupted [**PUSH AWAY FROM POOH**], causing a gap/separation [**POINT OUT SEPARATION**] between who we *are* and who we were *meant* to be.

1–Our instinctive God-centeredness turned into instinctive Self-centeredness

2–Our inherent tendency to love and do good devolved into an inherent tendency to sin and do evil – theologically we call this broken state “*Original Sin.*”³

5. And yet, the Bible says that the purpose of GRACE is to overcome this gap and mend our relationship with God– in other words, grace exists for this to happen...[**HUG POOH AGAIN**]

A–In a nutshell, that’s precisely what salvation (“*being saved, born again, accepting Christ,*” etc.) is all about: the reunion of humanity with God again –the restoration of the image of God in our lives.

1–In fact, the Greek and Hebrew words the Bible uses for “*salvation/to be saved*”⁴ literally mean “*to be healed,*” or “*to make whole again.*”

2–[RELATE CHRISTIAN “HUMPTY DUMPTY”...]

*“Humpty dumpty sat on a wall. (Humpty dumpty is we humans)
Humpty dumpty had a great fall. (The Fall of Adam & Eve in Gen. 3)
All of the King’s horses (the King here is God)
and all of the King’s Men & Women & Angels & Principalities
CAN put Humpty back together again.”*⁵

B–You see, *unlike* what we often hear today, the *primary* purpose of grace and salvation is *not* so we can “get to heaven,” but so that we can be restored to a right relationship with God⁶ – for this to happen... [**HUG POOH**].

6. Still, if this restored relationship is the goal, then the problem is that we’re all still like this... [**WALK AWAY FROM POOH**] separated from God and from who He created us to be.

A–In Romans 7, Paul puts it this way, “*I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... For I know that nothing good dwells within me.... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*”⁷

B–Now if we’re truthful, *all* of us in this room can attest to having these same feelings of inadequacy and weakness at times about our own actions and behaviors.⁸

–II–

7. Yet, the good news of the Bible is that since there’s nothing that we can ever do to “fix” or “save” ourselves, *God takes the initiative* to begin to do it *for us*.

A–In fact, the entire Bible is a history of God doing just this: ...from God seeking Adam in the garden after His sin⁹; to God giving Moses the “10 Commandments”; to God’s calls for accountability through the Old Testament prophets; and finally through the gift of His own son Jesus on the cross...

B–...All of these are biblical examples of God’s divine *initiative* in offering us a renewed, right relationship with Him.¹⁰

8. Now, the theological description for this initiative – this first offer of God’s love – is the phrase “***Prevenient Grace***”, and it’s merely a shorthand way of describing the unmerited favor of God that comes to us *before* we’re even aware that God exists or is seeking us.¹¹

A–We find examples of this throughout the scriptures, but two of the best texts are today’s readings from the book of Romans.

B–In Romans 5:8, the apostle Paul says that... (MSG) “*God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him*”...(NRSV) “*God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”

1–In other words, the nature of Prevenient Grace is that God knew us, loved us, and sent Jesus for us before we were ever even born!¹²

C–And in Romans 2:4, Paul asks, ...(MSG) “*Did you think that because He’s such a nice God, he’d let you off the hook? ...God is kind, but He’s not soft. In kindness (i.e., in Prevenient Grace) He takes us firmly by the hand & leads us into a radical life-change.*” ... (NRSV) “*Do you despise the riches of [God’s] kindness & forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that [His] kindness (i.e., P.Grace) is meant to lead you to repentance?*”¹³

1–So here we find that the purpose of Prevenient Grace is to lovingly lead us towards what the Bible traditionally calls “**Repentance**”(MSG: “*a radical life-change*”).¹⁴

9. But by whatever word(s) we use, it’s God way of “wooing us” back to a relationship with Himself [DEMONSTRATE WIND FROM POOH...].

A–...Like God serenading us with a beautiful song, singing our name and calling us to recognize how far we’ve strayed¹⁵ [DEMONSTRATE SEPARATION], and then to turn [TURN & FACE POOH] and begin the journey to “come back home.”

B–Prevenient Grace is the woman in Luke 15 who searches the house for her lost coin, and the Shepherd who leaves the 99 and goes in search of the one lost, and the Father who waits patiently for his prodigal son to return home.¹⁶

C–And we experience this grace in many ways: through people (e.g., parents or spouse); through events and circumstances that happen to us in life; through our encounter with God in the reading, hearing, and studying of the Bible; and even through the Sacraments of the church (Baptism and Holy Communion).¹⁷

10. Now, to be clear, Preventive Grace is not full salvation, but it gets the process going by giving us what author Steve Harper calls “Response-Ability”: the *ability to respond* to God's love that we would *not* have had otherwise.¹⁸

–III–

11. You see, Preventive Grace tells us that *no one* – none of us – is inescapably trapped by sin – that no matter how bad we think we've been, we're *not* beyond God's love or forgiveness.

A–It says that before we ever got *our* “act together,” or knew who *He* was, God loved *us* first.

B–So as we wrap up today, I want us to experience one example of Preventive Grace through God's own words in the Bible itself... [WATCH “*Father's Love Letter*” VIDEO CLIP (From SermonSpice.com –Edited time: 4:30; First 1:00 and last 0:50 edited out)]

12. The good news of Preventive Grace is that God loved us *first*, and is just waiting for you and me to love Him back. ...So, what will YOU and I do about it?

13. [PRAY]

14. [CLOSING SONG: UMH#170, “O How I Love Jesus”]

ENDNOTES:

1. The primary purpose of the season of Lent is the development of a life of faith among Christians.
2. Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionary, Term G5485, literally “*an undeserved gift, benefit, or favor bestowed on someone else.*”
3. See Genesis 6:5. Consequently, “*we are not sinners because we commit acts of sin, [but] we commit acts of sin because we are sinners*” [Steve Harper, John Wesley's Message for Today (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1983), p. 30].
4. The root Hebrew word for “salvation” is “*shalom.*” The root Greek word is “*sozo.*”
5. A few years ago there was a TV commercial for a senior alert alarm that had the line “*I've Fallen & I can't get up!*” This line also accurately describes the work of original sin in our faith. However, the “Christian” version goes like this: “*I've fallen and (because of what God has done for me) I CAN get up!*”
6. “Getting into heaven” is a “fringe benefit” of biblical salvation, but is *not* its primary purpose. That's why the popular question “*if you died tonight, would you know beyond a shadow of doubt that you were going to heaven?*” is biblically insufficient in motivating people to accept salvation. Its focus and motivation implies that salvation is only about “getting into heaven.” Biblically, however, salvation is *not* simply about receiving eternal life in the *hereafter*, but more importantly about living “abundant life” in the *here and now*.
7. Selected verses from Romans 7:14-20.

8. This is why the popular notion that “people are basically good” is simply a lie that both the Bible and our own experience confirm. If not, then how else does one explain the many acts of human violence and evil that are rampant in our world today (such as the Holocaust; school shootings; the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001; the murder and rape throughout our society; etc.)? What’s more is that there is absolutely *nothing* that *we* can do to “fix” this problem. Now, I’m not saying this to depress us or send us on guilt trips, but merely to highlight that without a realistic awareness of the disease of sin in our lives we cannot truly understand or appreciate the place of grace and salvation in life – E.G., If we don't realize that we're sick, then how can we seek (or appreciate the value of) a cure?

9. In Genesis 3:9 (after Adam sinned by eating the fruit), notice that it *doesn't* say that ADAM asked “*God, where are you?*” (as if our Sin made God go away), but instead that it was GOD who cried, “*Adam, where are YOU?*” In other words, even after the Fall, it was GOD (not us) who took the initiative.

10. Read John 3:16, John 1:16, and Romans 3:24.

11. The word “prevenient” comes from two Latin words (“pre” and “veneri”) which mean “*to come before*” – referring to “*the grace of God which comes before any conscious, personal awareness of/with God.*”

12. For example, Psalm 139:13-16 and Isaiah 49:1 remind us that God knew and loved us before we were even born! This is why in the Methodist Christian tradition, we not only baptize infants, but also invite children to receive the Lord’s Supper -- since these sacraments are tied to God’s prevenient grace, it recognizes that even *before* an infant/child is old enough to make a personal decision to accept Christ or to understand what Baptism or Holy Communion are all about, God has *already* loved and claimed them by sending Jesus to die for them. In other words, God’s love and Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross are not limited by whether WE are “old enough” to understand them or not.

13. For this reason, many theologians throughout Christian history (such as John Wesley, founder of Methodism) have believed that human moral “conscience” is a mark and sign of God’s prevenient grace -- it is an other-than-self awareness of right and wrong that nearly everyone seems to inherently possess (albeit to differing degrees).

14. “*Repentance*” has been defined as a turning away *from* sin and a turning *to* God by “*believing in the gospel.*” In this understanding, “*believing the gospel*” does not refer merely to mental assent – it is not just being able to say “I believe in the Bible,” or “I believe that Jesus is God's Son,” or intellectually agreeing with some creed or statement of faith. As John Wesley (founder of Methodism) once noted, even the devil believes in the Bible and that Jesus was God’s son! Instead, “belief” here refers to the placing of one’s heart-felt trust and confidence in the mercy and forgiveness of God. It is an act of one’s will, rather than of one’s emotions or intellect.

Furthermore, although Repentance IS form or type of Christian faith, it represents a very elementary and primitive form, based not upon pure *love for* God but upon *fear* of the consequences of *not* responding to God. While it may be a helpful inducement for some persons to *find* faith, there are many Christians who unfortunately find themselves stuck here in their faith journey – they obey God out of fear of hell or the consequences of disobedience. As we’ll discuss in future sermons in this series, though this can be an important introductory motivation for people to come to faith, there are greater and more noble motivations that a Christian should eventually aspire to.

15. Throughout Christian history, this awareness of sin and recognition of how it separates us from God has been called “*conviction of sin*” (See John 16:8 and Jude 1:15).

16. See also Ezekiel 34:11-16.

17. Here are more details about **HOW WE EXPERIENCE GOD'S PREVENIENT GRACE IN OUR LIVES:**

#1--Through *People* -- family, friends, parents, a godly Sunday School teacher, pastor, etc.

#2--Through *Events and Circumstances* -- God can convey his prevenient grace through good events (such as the birth of a child, a promotion, a vacation, or a worship service) and even through bad events (such as a car wreck, ward, or a natural disaster).

#3--Through *the Reading, Hearing, Studying, and Singing of God's Word* -- we can encounter God's grace and love through a sermon at church, a neighborhood Bible study, or even through a Gideon Bible we find and read in a hotel room.

#4--Through *the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion* -- these are biblical vessels that convey God's grace and love in a very real and tangible way. Read Endnote above for more details about how prevenient grace is experienced in the Sacraments (especially by infants and children).

18. Steve Harper, John Wesley's Message for Today, p. 44. Remember that the apostle Paul says in Romans 6:11 that because of the Fall, we are "*dead to sin*" and totally incapable of responding to God's offer of a renewed relationship with Him (Read also Romans 3:23-25). But God's prevenient grace gives us an ability to respond that we wouldn't have had otherwise. Furthermore, although it's a grace which enables and invites our response, it is not coercive -- that is: we have FREE WILL = we can turn it down and walk away from it (See Galatians 5:1-6). In this sense, faith is a free response because God does not force us to love him. It is not "*predestination*" as understood in some Christian traditions (which makes humans into puppets unable to choose), but rather a "divine foreknowledge" where, although we are totally free to choose or walk away from God and his love, that choice is already known in the eternal mind of God.