

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 9, 2014**

**WHAT GOD GIVES:
THE MERCY AND GRACE WE NEED**

Titus 3:3-8

You have probably never heard of Geerhardus Vos. Until now. Unless you are Dutch. Born in the Netherlands in 1862, Vos came to America with his parents in 1881 when his father accepted the pastorate of a Christian Reformed church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. After completing his education, Vos taught briefly at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids before becoming Professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Seminary, a position he occupied for 40 years until his retirement in 1932. In a sermon preached at Princeton more than a century ago (1902) Vos said: "I sometimes feel as if what we need most is ... a new [i.e., renewed] sense of where the center of gravity in the gospel lies." Preaching to a congregation made up largely of seminarians training to become pastors, he went on: "(W)hatever topic you preach on and whatever text you choose, there ought not to be in your whole repertoire a single sermon in which from beginning to end you do not convey to your hearers the impression that what you want to impart to them, you do not think it possible to impart to them in any other way than as a correlate and consequence of the eternal salvation of their souls through the blood of Christ, because in your own conviction that alone is the remedy which you can honestly offer to a sinful world."

Friends, the gospel of grace – the very, very good news of salvation, forgiveness, peace with God, and freedom from the debilitating, enslaving power of sin and guilt through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross for us, *is* the only remedy we can honestly offer to a sinful world. And to a church made up of sinners. It is the God-ordained prescription, the heaven-sent provision for what this world (and each of us) needs. As Paul said of the gospel in Romans 1:16, "... (I)t is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" – Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, educated and not, black and white, African, European, Middle Eastern, Asian, North American, South American, Australian, or whatever. The life-saving, life-giving, life-transforming power of the good news of God's amazing grace is the remedy the world needs more than any other. It is the remedy *we* need. It is the message we need to hear again and again. It is the gospel we need to preach to ourselves continually. It is the gospel I need to preach to myself over and over again. To use Geerhardus Vos' words, it is "where the center of gravity lies" for us as we seek to live as followers and ambassadors of the Lord Jesus Christ in this world.

As you know, we have been focusing for several weeks now on the theme of *What God Wants* in the context of Micah 6:8, which says that what the Lord desires and requires of us is "to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with (our) God." We have looked at different aspects of our calling to do justice and to love mercy. And we're not finished yet. There is more to come. We'll come back to this trio of qualities in the weeks ahead. But today, instead of continuing our study of *What God Wants*, I want to focus on *What God Gives*. In particular, I want us to take a fresh look at the mercy and grace God lavishes on undeserving, self-centered, self-serving sinners like you and me.

To do so, I want you to look with me at these verses in Titus 3, where Paul reminds Titus, his protégé and colleague in ministry, of the essence of the gospel message. It is the gospel in a nutshell. It is a bit too long for a tweet, but it is the distilled essence of the good news of God's mercy and grace by which we are saved and in which we now live.

THE WAY WE WERE

In Greek, the language in which the New Testament was originally written, verses 4-7 are all one very long sentence. But we need to begin with verse 3, where Paul describes the condition and characteristics of people who don't know Jesus in His saving power and love. Notice that when Paul names all these unsavory qualities, he is not merely pointing a finger at other people whose lives make it inherently obvious that they desperately need Jesus. It is true that they do desperately need Jesus. But it is not just "other people" who need Jesus. It is us, too. And Paul. The same man who could boast to the Philippians about his devotion and commitment to the Jewish law as a Pharisee, and about being "faultless" with regard to "legalistic righteousness" (Philippians 3:5-6), here includes himself among those whose hearts were saturated with sinful desires and attitudes, their outward righteousness notwithstanding. On the outside, Paul the Pharisee seemed to have it all together. On the inside, though, he was rotten to the core. As were you. As was I, until by God's mercy and grace I was saved. Until the Holy Spirit came to take up residence in my life and began the work of transformation in me.

The picture Paul paints in verse 3 is not very flattering: "(F)oolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures," living "in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another." In *The Message*, this verse reads: "It wasn't so long ago that we ourselves were stupid and stubborn, dupes of sin, ordered every which way by our glands, going around with a chip on our shoulder, hated and hating back." Maybe you don't like the sounds of this. Maybe you think it sounds like some people you know, but it doesn't describe you or the way you were before you became a Christian. But Paul says: "We ourselves." It is a description of the condition of *our* hearts, of the way *we* were before we were saved. Not a pretty picture, is it?

What Paul is saying, of course, is that the gospel is for sinners. And we are all sinners. Tullian Tchvidjian points out in his new book, *One Way Love*, that we are not basically good people becoming better, we are flawed men and women who are unable to fix what is wrong with us, no matter how hard we try (*One Way Love*, 48). That is really the "bad news" of the gospel. The human heart is a breeding ground for all kinds of evil, sinful, selfish desires, attitudes, words and actions. In reality, we are all probably a lot worse than we think ourselves to be.

LEAGUE OF THE GUILTY

There is a new book out entitled *Unapologetic*, written by a Brit named Francis Spufford. The book is subtitled *Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense..* This is not your traditional defense of the Christian faith. Its appeal is more to the emotions than to the intellect. However, this is not to say that Spufford makes no

appeals to the intellect. For example, here is a paragraph with a most significant point: “Of all things,” Spufford writes, “Christianity isn’t supposed to be about gathering up the good people (shiny! happy! squeaky clean!) and excluding the bad people (frightening! alien! repulsive!) for the very simple reason that *there aren’t any good people* ... This goes flat contrary to the predominant image of [Christianity] existing in prissy, fastidious little enclaves, far from life’s messier zones and inclined to get all ‘judgmental’ about them. Of course there are Christians like that ... The religion certainly can slip into being a club or a cozy affinity group or a wall against the world. But it isn’t supposed to be. What it’s supposed to be is *a league of the guilty*” (Spufford, *Unapologetic*, 45-48, emphasis his).

You and I and Spufford and Tullian and Titus and Paul and every person who has ever lived all belong to the “league of the guilty.” If, however, we understand and embrace in faith the good news of what God in His mercy and grace has done for us, we are no longer defined by our guilt. We are no longer defined by our sins. We are no longer defined by our rebellion against God. We are no longer defined by our failure, by our inability, to obey God perfectly. Now, in Christ, we belong to the “league of the forgiven.” It is all by God’s mercy and grace shown to undeserving sinners.

THE GOOD NEWS

Dear friends, I have some really, really, good news for you today: “When the kindness and love [*philanthropia*, ‘love for mankind’] of God our Savior appeared” – a reference to the incarnation of Christ, God Himself taking on our flesh and blood and coming to live among us – “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth [or regeneration] and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7).

Apart from the saving work of Christ for us, apart from His mercy and grace freely given to undeserving sinners, we were (or are) in bad shape. “Bad shape” is actually an understatement. We’re doomed. We’re dead. Spiritually dead in our transgressions and sins. Powerless to resurrect ourselves. Powerless to change our hearts.

HE SAVED US

But then, Paul writes this little old three-letter word “but.” (In the Greek, it is actually a two-letter word, *de*.) Tiny word, but towering in significance. The word “but” introduces the contrast between then and now, between before and after, between past and present, between what we were and what we now are in Christ. When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared in the coming of Christ to live among us and to suffer and die for us on the cross, what did God do? “He saved us.” *He* saved us. We didn’t do it. We didn’t save ourselves. He didn’t save us because of our innate goodness or the merit of our acts of righteousness. He didn’t save us because our performance earned salvation for us. He didn’t save us because we cleaned up our act and straightened out our lives and started going to church again. No, no, no!

“He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy” (3:5). He – *God* – saved *us*. Not because of our merit, but because of His mercy. Not because we are good, but because of His grace. “He saved us through the washing of rebirth” (3:5b). In other words, we didn’t clean ourselves up. God cleaned us up. He washed us clean on the inside. He cleansed us from all our sins, a divine act of mercy and grace to which baptism points. He made us spiritually alive in Him – made us new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) – and began to renew and sanctify us through the work of the Holy Spirit in us (3:5c). In all of this, God was not and is not stingy. He was and is generous with His mercy. He was and is generous with His grace. It is always sufficient, always enough to meet our need (2 Corinthians 12:9). He was and is generous with His Spirit, whom He has given not only to be *with* us in all our joys and trials (as if that were not enough), but to dwell *in* us, in order to make us more and more like Jesus our Savior.

JUSTIFIED

He – God – “justified (us) by His grace” (3:7). We did not justify ourselves. We cannot justify ourselves before God. We are foolish to think otherwise. But God justified us by His grace. Our sins He has forgiven – past, present, and future. On the basis of our Savior’s righteousness, on the basis of His substitutionary sacrifice for us on the cross, God has declared us, and all who trust in Jesus and Him alone for their salvation, righteous in His sight. At peace with God. Forgiven, free, and fully alive. With the promise of eternal life and an inheritance in God’s eternal kingdom. It is all by God’s mercy and grace.

Salvation is the gracious work of God from start to finish. There is nothing we need to contribute to it and nothing we *can* contribute to it. It is all a gift from God. Even the response of faith by which we receive or embrace God’s grace in salvation is a gift from God. It is all from Him. The only thing you and I contribute to our salvation is our need for it, our total inability to earn it or achieve it. It is all a gift of God’s mercy, in which He does not treat us as our sins deserve (Psalm 103:10), and His grace, which comes free of charge to people like us who don’t deserve it and never will.

THE NATURE OF GRACE

“Grace,” says Paul Zahl, “is love that seeks you out when you have nothing to give in return.... Grace is being loved when you are unlovable.... Grace is a love that has nothing to do with you, the beloved. It has everything and only to do with the lover.... (Grace) reflects a decision on the part of the giver, the one who loves, in relation to the receiver, the one who is loved, that negates any qualifications the receiver may personally hold.... Grace is *one-way love*” (Paul Zahl, *Grace in Practice: A Theology of Everyday Life*, 36).

Tullian Tchvidjian writes that grace “refuses to be controlled by our innate sense of fairness, reciprocity, and evenhandedness. It defies (conventional) logic.” As we have already noted, “it has nothing to do with earning, merit, or deservedness. It is a liberating contradiction between what we deserve and what we get. Grace is unconditional acceptance given to an undeserving person by an unobligated lover. It is one-way love” (*One Way Love*, 33).

You see, don't you, that God is an "Unobligated Giver?" He is under no obligation to love any of us at all. Yet He chooses to love. I am an undeserving person. So are you. None of us deserves to be loved by God. Does that stop God from loving us? No! What does God do? He showers us with mercy on top of mercy, with grace, grace, and more grace. Generously. Abundantly. Sovereignly. Unconditionally.

On the worst day you can possibly imagine, when your life seems to be spiraling downward out of control, remember that God is still merciful and gracious. God's character does not change. He will always be merciful and gracious to His people. He will never let go of you.

When you think your life couldn't possibly be any better and you are tempted to congratulate yourself, as if you deserve every blessing you have ever received, remember that God is merciful and gracious. Remember that mercy and grace are gifts given to people who don't deserve them. And nobody deserves them. Including you.

THE PRISON OF PERFORMANCISM

When I graduated from seminary a long time ago, I went to work with a pastor who, as I look back on it, was trying to validate his existence and prove his worth as a pastor by always being busy. He never seemed to tire of telling me (and others) how busy he was and all the things he was juggling in his life. I could not have kept up with him if I had wanted to. I think he thought he *had* to be busy, he had to be doing, doing, doing, or he would fail to live up to someone's standard or expectations. Maybe you know someone like that. Maybe you see the face of someone like that when you look in a mirror. Maybe someone instilled in you the idea that your performance determines your worth as a person. The expectations my pastor-friend thought he had to meet weren't God's. He didn't have to try to earn God's approval by his performance. Neither do you. Neither do I. In the words of Tullian, Jesus came to set us free from "the prison of performancism."

You don't have to impress God with all the things you check off your to-do list each day. He loves you anyway. Just as you are. There is nothing you can do to make Him stop loving you or cause Him to love you less. And He cannot possibly love you more than He already does. You don't have to prove how important you are by how busy you are. Jesus died for you anyway. That is the gospel. That is grace. It is what God gives free of charge to people like us who don't deserve it and never will.

This message of God's sovereign mercy and grace freely given to undeserving sinners is where the center of gravity in the gospel lies. It is the only remedy we have to offer to a world in need. And to each other.

Believe it. Receive it. Preach it to yourself and to anyone who will listen, over and over and over again. Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name and the spreading of Your fame. Amen.