

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 13, 2011**

**GRACE WORKS**

**Ephesians 2:1-10**

I hope you won't mind too much if I talk about football for a few minutes this morning. First of all, I take my hat off to all my Packer friends and cheeseheads everywhere for the Green Bay Packers' victory over my Pittsburgh Steelers in Super Bowl XLV last Sunday. The Packers played a great game. They were clearly the better team, and deserved to win. So, Packer nation, I salute you.

I want to talk about Big Ben Roethlisberger, the Steelers' QB who already has two Super Bowl championship rings. He did not have a great game on the field last Sunday. And, if you follow football at all, you probably know Ben has had lots of off the field troubles in the last few years, the most recent of which led to his suspension by the NFL for the first four games of the 2010 season, for violating the NFL's personal conduct policy. There is a certain standard of conduct which every player is expected to maintain in his personal life. The NFL, understandably, does not want any of its players or representatives to damage the name or image or reputation of the league in any way.

I don't know if Big Ben committed any crimes. In the end, he was not charged with any criminal behavior. There is no question, though, that he has been a jerk. A big jerk. There is no question that he made some really bad decisions. There is no question that he was pursuing a lifestyle that is not pleasing to God. No question about it.

Throughout the season and in the NFL playoffs, leading right up to the Super Bowl, it seemed that the question swirling around Ben was about redeeming himself. It just wouldn't go away. By having a good season and leading the Steelers to the Super Bowl after returning from his suspension, did he think he had been able to redeem himself? Could he redeem himself by leading the Steelers to victory in Super Bowl XLV? As much as the talking heads opined about it, and as often as reporters asked him about it, Big Ben never gave an answer, as far as I know.

I don't know Ben's heart. I'm sure not an apologist for him. I've been terribly disappointed in his off the field behavior. I don't know what specific changes he may have recently made in his personal life. I've heard rumors of some positive changes in his life, which I hope are true. I sincerely hope Ben has turned (or turned back) to the Lord. I sincerely hope he has truly repented of the sins in his life and received forgiveness from God. I sincerely hope Ben has placed his trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of his life, and that he desires to live his life from now on as a faithful follower of Christ. That is my hope for Ben. And it is way, way more important than how many Super Bowl rings he may win.

What I long to hear from Ben Roethlisberger, in response to this question about redeeming himself, is something like this: "Redeem myself? Are you kidding? There is no way I could ever redeem myself. I could never win enough Super Bowls or do enough good things off the

field to redeem myself. The truth is that none of us can redeem ourselves. It is impossible. But I have been redeemed. Jesus Christ has redeemed me. He has done for me what I can never do for myself. He paid for my sins on the cross. All of them. I know I'm still a sinner, but by the grace of God, I am a forgiven sinner. I am a redeemed sinner. And I want to show my gratitude to God in the way I live."

Wouldn't that be a tremendous testimony and a blessing to any of us who think we have to somehow redeem ourselves? You can't do it. But Jesus can.

Enough about football. Last Sunday Jarrett reminded us of the importance of repentance and quietness before the Lord as he preached on Isaiah 30:15:

*In repentance and rest is your salvation,  
in quietness and trust is your strength.*

I encourage you to continue to meditate on this verse, and to find strength for each day, to find your hope in the grace and goodness of God, and to have the assurance of your salvation as you draw near to God in a spirit of repentance, quiet rest, and trust in God's gracious provision for you.

Two Sundays ago we talked about grace and ungrace. We talked about the poisonous, toxic nature of ungrace, and the healing balm of grace. I urged you not to allow the seed of ungrace to be planted in your life, or the bitter root of ungrace to grow up and cause trouble in your life or in our fellowship, lest you or anyone else miss out on the amazingness of God's grace. I shared with you Philip Yancey's testimony that grace – which is "Christianity's best gift to the world" because it is God's best gift to us – "comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it, and (says Yancey) I am one of those people." Pardon my grammar for saying it this way, but we are all "one of those people." Nobody deserves grace. I don't. You don't. Nobody does. The nature of grace is that it is not deserved. It is a gift, pure and simple. Grace is God's best gift to us. And it is the heart of the Christian faith.

Years ago at a conference held in England on world religions, experts from all over the world met to discuss and debate the question of what, if anything, was unique to the Christian faith in relation to other religions. Was it the doctrine of the incarnation? No. Other religions have different versions of gods appearing in human form. Was it the resurrection? No. Again, other religions have accounts of the dead returning to life. (Of course, regarding both the incarnation and the resurrection, and their fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the specific claims of the Christian faith *are* unique and are grounded in history.) Was it the belief in heaven, or life after death, or the immortality of the soul? Did it have to do with sin or hell or something else?

The debate continued for some time, until C. S. Lewis, the famous author, entered the room. In his own life, Lewis had traveled the road from atheism to agnosticism as a young man, finally embracing the Christian faith after examining the differences between various world religions. Lewis asked what they were talking about. The conferees told him they were debating Christianity's unique contribution among the religions of the world.

Without hesitation, Lewis said: “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.” After thinking about it, they concluded that Lewis was right. (Story adapted from Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* and James Emery White, *Church & Culture* blog, vol. 7, no. 2, January 6, 2011.)

As Philip Yancey writes, “The notion of God’s love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity.” Perhaps the reason so many people in the world resist the idea of grace, or simply walk away from it, is that we want to be able to say we have earned God’s love or approval by our own efforts. Yancey points out that the Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of *karma*, the Jewish covenant, and the Muslim code of law, all offer different ways to try to earn divine approval. “Only Christianity,” he says, “dares to make God’s love unconditional.” It is grace, God’s condescending love and favor, expressed most fully, most powerfully, most completely, in the incarnation, sinless life, undeserved suffering, substitutionary death, resurrection from the dead, and exaltation in heaven of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of sinners, that sets the Christian faith and life apart from all the other religions of the world.

One night on the *Larry King Live* television show, Larry King’s guest was Bono, the world-famous lead singer of the rock band U2. Bono was telling Larry King about his commitment to Jesus Christ and how he was trying to live out Christ’s love in the world, which prompted King to ask: “What makes Christianity different from all the other religions of the world? What does Christianity have to offer that the other religions do not?” It sounds a lot like the question being discussed at that British conference C. S. Lewis attended, doesn’t it?

Bono paused for a moment, and then said: “All the other religions of the world, in one way or another, teach *karma*.” (There are variations of it, but *karma* basically involves the law of cause and effect, or some kind of impersonal fate.) “Only Jesus offers grace. In all the other religions of the world, people end up having to pay a penalty for their sins. Only Jesus Christ, by His grace, makes it possible for people to be delivered from the consequences of the sins they have committed in this life.” (Taken from Tony Campolo, *Stories That Feed Your Soul*, p. 25.)

Bono may not be a seminary-trained theologian. He may not be an expert in the fine points of world religions. But when he tells Larry King that only Jesus offers grace, he is right on. Saving grace is found in Jesus alone. Redeeming grace is found in Jesus alone. Forgiving grace is found in Jesus alone. Sanctifying grace is found in Jesus alone. Sufficient grace is found in Jesus alone. The grace to live the Christian life, the grace to persevere to the end and not give up, is found in Jesus alone.

And it is something you and I will never deserve. It comes free of charge, no strings attached, to people who don’t and won’t and can’t deserve it.

You have probably heard this way of explaining the differences between justice, mercy, and grace. Justice, of course, involves getting what you deserve. If you have done wrong, justice is about getting the punishment that is coming to you. Mercy means you don’t get the punishment you deserve for doing wrong. When someone else has hurt us or wronged us in

some way, our natural inclination is to demand justice. But when we have broken the law or done wrong to someone, it is mercy that we want, not justice. What about grace? Grace happens when you get something you don't deserve. It is when you get something good when you really deserve something bad, or when you deserve nothing at all. Grace is an undeserved gift.

I think this is a pretty cool way to illustrate how justice, mercy, and grace differ from each other. If a police officer pulls you over for speeding and gives you a ticket, that's justice – presuming you were really speeding! If an officer pulls you over for speeding and gives you a warning instead of a ticket, that's mercy. But if an officer pulls you over for speeding and, instead of giving you a ticket or a warning, he gives you a Krispy Kreme donut he just bought, that is grace. Grace is getting a donut when you deserve a speeding ticket. (From Campolo, p. 27.) God's grace – the grace by which we are saved, the grace by which God has made us alive in Christ, the grace by which we live each day as followers of Christ – is even better than a Krispy Kreme donut! Amen?

Paul explains the wonder of God's grace and how it works in Ephesians 2. First, he describes our human condition apart from grace. Apart from God's saving grace in Christ, we are ruined and completely without hope. In verses 1-3, Paul says we are dead, we are slaves, and we are condemned. Spiritually speaking, verse 1 says that we are dead in our transgressions and sins, in our willful disobedience to God's commands and in our failure to fulfill the righteous requirements of God. Physically we are alive. But spiritually we are dead, and powerless to make ourselves come alive.

As if being spiritually dead weren't enough, Paul says in verses 2 and 3 that we are also slaves. We are enslaved to the unholy trinity of the world, the devil (who is called "the ruler of the kingdom of the air" in verse 2), and the flesh ("the cravings of our sinful nature and ... its desires and thoughts" in verse 3). In his book *Transforming Grace*, which is today's book of the week, Jerry Bridges describes our slavery this way: Apart from God's saving grace, we are captivated by the world and its ways, under the sway of Satan, and prisoners of our own sinful lusts. Slaves to the world, the flesh, and the devil.

But that is not all. Apart from God's grace, we are objects of God's righteous and holy wrath (verse 3). Condemnation by God is what we deserve because we have violated His law and rebelled against His rule. Without exception. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way (Isaiah 53:6). The holy wrath of God's justice is what we deserve. Apart from the grace of God. Apart from the saving work of Christ on our behalf.

In essence, Paul is giving the Ephesians a picture of "the way we were" before we were redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ: spiritually dead and unable to do anything to commend ourselves to God, enslaved to the world, the flesh and the devil, and deserving of God's wrath. If you're old enough, maybe you can hear the sound of Barbra Streisand nostalgically singing "The Way We Were," or visualize the romance between Streisand and Robert Redford in the movie. But trust me when I say there is nothing romantic or nostalgic about our spiritual condition apart from Christ and His grace. And there is nothing we can do to fix what is wrong with us. Absolutely nothing.

But then, as Paul says in verses 4 and 5, when things couldn't look more bleak for us, God Himself intervened. Translated from the Greek, verse 4 begins: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love (*agape*) with which He loved us" – because of His mercy and love, God took the initiative and stepped in to rescue us from eternal ruin. Listen to this:

- We were dead as a doornail in our transgressions and sins, but God intervened and made us spiritually alive with Christ.
- We were in bondage to our sinful nature, in bondage to the world, the flesh and the devil, but God intervened and redeemed us through the atoning death of Christ on our behalf.
- We were objects of wrath, but God intervened and made us trophies of His grace, which is given free of charge to people who do not and will not ever deserve it. Now, in Christ, we are a thing of beauty. We are masterpieces (*poiema*) of God's grace, created in Christ to do good works for His glory (verse 10).

"By grace you have been saved" (*Xariti este sesosmenoi*). This is so important Paul says it twice – first in verse 5, and again in verse 8, where he adds, "through faith" (*dia pisteos*). It is not about anything we do. It is not about something we can achieve if we try hard enough or work at it long enough. It is by grace – God's grace – from beginning to end. It is only by the grace of God that any of us will ever make it to heaven.

You see, grace works when all the good works in the world aren't enough. Grace works when our most determined efforts to earn God's approval fail. Grace works when every do-it-yourself plan under the sun falls short. Which it will. The performance plan, no matter how hard you try, doesn't work. The grace plan is the only one that works.

So, what should we do? How about this:

Begin by giving thanks to God for the gift and gifts of His grace in all its fullness. It is more amazing, more incredible than any of us know.

If you have never embraced God's saving grace by trusting and receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of your life, say yes to God's grace and receive Him by faith today. I'd love to talk or pray with you after the service.

If you have been saved by God's grace, live each day by grace. Trust God for the sufficiency of His grace in your life, and let your life be a channel of His grace to others. With the help of the Holy Spirit, live a grace-filled life to the glory and praise of God.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.