

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 20, 2011**

A PICTURE OF GOD

Psalm 145:8-21

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

As we continue to think about grace today, in particular, about the grace God shows to us and the gracious way He treats us, let's turn in the Bible to Psalm 145. Like so many of the psalms, Psalm 145 is a psalm of David. It is actually the last of David's psalms in the Book of Psalms

One of the unusual things about this psalm is that it is an acrostic hymn of praise based on the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. What this means is that the first word of each verse begins with each successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with verse 13 accounting for two separate letters. If it were an acrostic in English, the first word of verse 1 would begin with the letter "A," verse 2 with the letter "B," verse 3 with "C," and so on. Unless you're like Jarrett Van Tine, and you actually do your daily Bible reading from the Old Testament in Hebrew (which Jarrett does), you can't tell that this psalm was written as an acrostic, because it doesn't work out that way in English. But David did write it originally as an acrostic.

One Bible commentator (Derek Kidner) calls the psalm "an alphabet of praise" which flows from the heart of David. Another commentator (Warren Wiersbe) points out that this psalm contains no petitions or requests, no call for help, no confession of sins, no cry for mercy. It is a psalm of praise from start to finish. It begins and ends with praise, and everything in between speaks of the praiseworthiness of God. Of course, there is a place for all these other elements in prayer, as many other psalms, including many psalms of David, attest. But this psalm is "pure praise" to God for His greatness and goodness, for the glory of His kingdom, and for His sovereign grace (Wiersbe).

Let your praise and thanksgiving flow to God as we give our full and reverent attention to the reading of His Word from Psalm 145. hear the Word of God.

WHAT GOD LOOKS LIKE

Do you know the story about the little girl who was sitting at the kitchen table, intently drawing a picture? Her mother wandered over to see what she was doing. Not sure what the picture was supposed to represent, the mother asked: "What are you drawing?"

"I'm drawing a picture of God," the little child said.

"But, dear," said her mother, "nobody knows what God looks like."

To which the little girl said confidently: "They will when I'm done."

GRACIOUS AND COMPASSIONATE

Do you know what God looks like? None of us has ever actually seen God. But even if we don't (and can't) know exactly what God looks like, we *can* have a clear and accurate picture of what God is like – a picture of God's character, a portrait of God's heart. You can see the magnificent, transcendent beauty of what God is like in the multiple reasons David finds in this psalm to praise God. Apart from the Incarnation when God the Son took on our flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood of mortal men and women like us, apart from the coming of Jesus in love to give His life on the cross as a sacrifice for our sin, apart from the message of the gospel captured in John 3:16, I'm not sure there is any better picture of God than what we find in Psalm 145 in general, and verse 8 in particular. Look at verse 8:

*The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.*

Gracious and compassionate. Full of grace and compassion. Slow to get angry. Rich (abounding) in love. Isn't that a terrific description (or picture) of what God is like? Of course, it is not a complete picture of God. In addition to the qualities of grace and compassion, God is also "righteous in all His ways," as David says in verse 17. He is uncompromising in His attitude and posture toward sin. As we sang earlier today, God is "Holy, Holy, Holy." Only God is holy, there is none beside Him. God alone is "perfect in power, in love and purity" (Reginald Heber). David also acknowledges the justice of God in his declaration in verse 20 that the Lord will destroy all the wicked who refuse to turn from the evil of their hearts. You can respond to God's offer of mercy and grace, and not only not get the punishment you deserve (like a ticket for speeding), but receive a gift you don't deserve (like a Krispy Kreme donut from a police officer instead of a ticket). Of, if you refuse God's mercy and grace, you can expect to receive justice from Him. Which will not be pretty or pleasant.

Yes, God is righteous and holy and just. But, as Peter says in 1 Peter 5:10, He is also "the God of all grace." Do you hear that? He is the God of *all* grace. Listen to what Jerry Bridges says in *Transforming Grace* (last Sunday's "book of the week"): "Over and over again, the Bible portrays God as gracious and generous, blessing His people freely without regard to their demerits, rather than because of their merits" (p. 58).

There is something about this I have come to see in a fresh way this week. I'm not sure if I ever really saw it before. I understand that grace is not a reward God gives to people who earn it. That is not what grace is about. As Philip Yancey said, "Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it, and I am one of those people." I'm going to keep saying it: *I* am one of those people, too. And so are you. If it is earned, it is not grace. If it is a payment received for service rendered, it is not grace. That part, I already get.

Here is the part that is new to me. Bridges says that God blesses us in His grace not *in spite of* our sins (which is the way I'm used to thinking of it), but *without regard to* our sins (*Transforming Grace*, p. 65). I don't know if I can adequately articulate the distinction between *in spite of* and *without regard to*, but I think there is a difference. God extends His

grace to us without regard to our sins. He does not first examine our sin under a microscope or weigh the seriousness of our sins, only then deciding if He wants to play “the grace card” *in spite of* our transgressions and sins. No. Because the Lord is by nature gracious and compassionate, He acts with grace and compassion toward us regardless of the sins we have committed – *without regard to* whatever we have done that we ought not to have done, and *without regard to* whatever we have failed to do that we ought to have done.

Apart from the sin Jesus calls blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29), there is no sin you can commit which disqualifies you from the possibility of receiving God’s mercy and grace in forgiveness. I am confident that none of you here today has committed the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. If you *have* committed this sin, your heart will have become so hardened, so deadened to the things of God, that you won’t care if you have done it. I trust that this is not true of any of us.

The Lord is gracious and compassionate to us not merely *in spite of* our sins (as if that is not amazing enough), He is gracious and compassionate to us *without regard to* our sins, just because that is the way God is. He plays “the grace card” and treats us with compassion simply because it is His nature to be gracious and compassionate.

Does the fact that He is gracious and compassionate mean that God doesn’t care about sin? Does it mean that sin – your sin, my sin, our sin, the world’s sin – is no big deal to God? Does it mean that God simply glosses over our sin? Does it mean that God is OK with our sin? No, no, no and no. Yes, God is gracious. He is full of mercy and grace. As David points out in Psalm 103, the Lord does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities (103:10). That is the mercy and grace of God. But, as we have already noted, God is also holy and just. He takes sin seriously, so seriously that He has gone to great lengths and great personal cost to satisfy the requirements of His own holiness and justice by providing the ultimate and only acceptable payment for our sins. He did it through the death of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross to make atonement for our sins. If you ever wonder if sin is really a big deal to God, just look at the cross. If you ever wonder if God really is gracious and merciful, look at the cross. You’ll see the answer there.

SLOW TO GET ANGRY

Be sure to notice in verse 8 that David doesn’t say God *never* gets angry. He says that God is *slow* to get angry. Some people think that God is always angry and looking for any and every opportunity to pounce on us in the full fury of His wrath. Not so. God *does* get angry. God *will* get angry, if you resolutely refuse to come to Him in repentance and trusting faith. He *will* get angry, if you persistently resist and reject Jesus and His saving work on the cross, and walk away from His mercy and grace.

But anger is not the primary posture of God’s heart toward us. Wrath, as someone has said, is not God’s preferred option. God did not send His Son into the world because He was angry with us. God did not send Jesus into the world to punish us or to get even with us. No. It was because of His love for us (John 3:16; Romans 5:8, 1 John 4:9-10). It was because of His

great love for us that Jesus came to redeem us. God is slow to get angry, David says, but He abounds in love. His love overflows to us. Even if we try to block it out.

In one of their books, a husband and wife duo of Christian psychologists named Les and Leslie Parrott suggest that the sun offers a good analogy of God's love. It is the nature of the sun, they say, to shine, to give warmth and light. And it is the nature of God to love. We can choose to hide from the sun. We can lock ourselves in a dark room, for example. But we do not keep the sun from shining just because we try to hide in a place where the sunlight cannot reach us. The analogy isn't perfect, I know, but that is how it is with God's love. You can reject God's love, but God keeps on loving you. Regardless of the life choices you make, God still loves you. He is still gracious and compassionate. He is still slow to anger, and rich in love. His love is not based on your obedience or performance. It is unconditional. Because of His love, because of His mercy and grace, it is possible to have a relationship with God. (Parrott and Parrott, *Relationships*, p. 172)

A COMMON REFRAIN IN SCRIPTURE

David wasn't the first, or the only one, to draw this picture of God for us in His (God's) compassion and grace, patience and love. It is the way God revealed Himself and described Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34. This was after God got Moses' attention and spoke to him out of a burning bush (Exodus 3). It was after God used Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 12-14). It was after God gave the law to Moses up on the mountain (Exodus 19). It was after the people of Israel induced Aaron to make a golden calf for them to worship, after Moses came back down from the mountain, after he saw what the people were doing and, burning with anger, broke the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments, and after Moses pleaded with God to forgive the people (Exodus 32).

After all this, Moses went back up on Mount Sinai to meet with God again (Exodus 33-34). There, the Scripture says, the Lord came down in a cloud and passed in front of Moses. This is what God said to Moses about Himself: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished ..." (34:6-7). Compassionate and gracious. Slow to anger. Abounding in love and faithfulness. Forgiving and just in His judgment. This is the picture of Himself that God gave to Moses. And do you know what Moses did? He "bowed to the ground at once and worshiped" (34:8). Right then and there, He did the only reasonable thing, the only thing that makes sense. He worshiped God.

When God met with Moses there on the mountain, He did not first give Moses a vision of His immense power or majesty, but of His glory revealed in His character – in the qualities of mercy and grace, compassion and love, faithfulness and forgiveness and justice. What the Lord said there to Moses became one of the most often repeated sayings in the Old Testament. In addition to Psalm 145, David quotes it in Psalm 86:15 and Psalm 103:8. It is also quoted, in part, in Psalm 111:4 and Psalm 116:5. In 2 Chronicles 30:9, as King Hezekiah calls the people of Israel and Judah to return to the Lord, their king reminds them that "the LORD your God is gracious and compassionate." As the Levites led the residents of Jerusalem in worship

during the time of Nehemiah and Ezra, they prayed to the Lord: “But You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Nehemiah 9:17). The prophet Joel urged the people of Judah to repent of their rebellion against God and to return to Him in these words: “Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Joel 2:13).

Then there is Jonah. After running away from God and ending up in the belly of a great fish, Jonah finally came to his senses and obeyed God’s call to go and preach God’s Word to the people of Nineveh. When the people took Jonah’s message to heart and repented, God relented and had mercy on them. But Jonah disapproved. He was disappointed with God. God’s mercy and compassion made him mad. He told God it was the reason he had been so quick to try to run away from Him. He said: “I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (Jonah 4:1-2). Here is a man – a minister of God – who knew the character of God, who knew what God is like, who knew that God is gracious and compassionate in His dealings with people, and it made him angry, because he (Jonah) didn’t think “those people” (the Ninevites) *deserved* God’s mercy, grace, compassion, and love. Well, of course they didn’t. Nobody does. It comes free of charge to people who *don’t* and *won’t* and *can’t* deserve it. Like the people of Nineveh. And America. Like us.

Are you like Jonah? Are there people or groups or nations you wish God would destroy instead of bringing them to true repentance, faith and devotion to Him? It might be a good thing for all of us to think about.

Listen:

*The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.*

This picture of God was burned into the consciousness of God’s covenant people in the Old Testament. It is a picture of the heart of God, whose love for us never fails, and whose grace to us covers every sin and every detail of our lives.

If you know these things, you know what God looks like. And you can tell others what He is like.

GRACE MAKES FREE

I’ll close with this. I wish there had been time last Sunday to share this with you. The Holocaust in which more than six million Jews were killed is a picture of the worst in human nature. Do you know that above the entrance to the concentration camp at Auschwitz there was a sign in German which read *Arbeit macht frei*, which means “*Work makes free.*” At Dachau there was a sign that said the same thing.

It held out the hope that work will set you free and give you freedom. It was a lie. A monstrous lie. A diabolical lie. A false promise. The Nazis told the people in those camps that hard work would bring liberation. But the “liberation” they got was horrible humiliation, inhuman suffering and, for many, death.

The idea that work makes free was not only a lie employed by the Nazis. It is a lie of the devil yet today. It is a religious lie. It holds out a false hope, the false promise that if we are good enough, if we do enough good things and try hard to live a good life, we can make it to heaven on our own merit or virtue.

If that is true, you and I don't need grace. We don't need a God who is gracious and compassionate, a God who is slow to anger and rich in love. But works don't make us free. Works won't make us free. It is by grace we are saved – by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone – not by works, no matter how many good works we have to our name (Ephesians 2:8).

Grace works. Grace is what makes us free. God's grace. Grace which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it. Grace which is freely shown to us by God, whose nature is to be gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

May you know the fullness of His grace in your life. May His grace make you truly free. Free to live for Him. And may we never forget what God is like.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.