

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 10, 2011**

GRACE IN HIGH DEFINITION

John 8:1-11

There are two important things I want to do before we turn to the reading of God's Word. First, I want us to pray for Pastor Bob and his back surgery scheduled for this coming Wednesday morning at INOVA Fairfax Hospital to deal with chronic pain and issues in his lower back that he has lived with since his Army days back in the 1980s. It is a big deal, and it is our blessed privilege as a family of believers to be able to approach the throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:16) to pray for Pastor Bob. So, let's join our hearts together in prayer.

The second thing is that I have something on my heart I want to talk about with you. I've been preaching about grace for the last two months or so, since the last Sunday in January, to be precise. Many of you have told me that these messages have been a blessing to you, or that the Lord has used these messages to speak to your life. Praise the Lord. I praise the Lord for that. I praise the Lord for teaching us (and teaching *me*) more and more about His grace, about the meaning and miracle of grace, about our mission in life as followers of Christ to be instruments or channels of grace in a world of ungrace. God is showing us, I think perhaps reminding us of something we forget from time to time, which is that He desires the church – *His church, this church* – to be a grace place: a place where we know our own desperate need for God's saving grace, forgiving grace, sustaining grace, protecting grace; a place where we show grace to each other, to people both inside and outside the church; and where we bear witness in both our words and actions to the amazing-ness of God's grace as our lives intersect with a world and a culture full of people who have not yet experienced this amazing grace.

I'm gratified that God has used these messages for good in your lives. I'm not finished talking about grace yet. In one sense, I will never finish talking about grace, because it is the heart of the gospel. But I plan to continue to explore different aspects and life-applications of this grace which, as we have said numerous times, is a gift from God which comes free of charge to people who do not, will not, and cannot ever deserve it, including you and me.

If God has blessed you through these messages on grace, I want to take the bold step of asking you to take the bold step, first, of telling someone you know about what God is teaching you about grace, and, second, of inviting that someone (or another someone) to come to church with you to learn about the grace of God and the God of grace, and to experience God's grace in their own lives. If your life is being enriched by the messages from God's Word and by uplifting worship that draws you into the very presence of God, tell someone about it and invite them to come, listen, see, and experience for themselves.

Next Sunday (which is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week) is a great time to bring a guest, as our Choir presents the message of the suffering, death, burial, and resurrection of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ in music. Easter Sunday, just two weeks away, is a perfect

occasion to bring a guest, as we celebrate the resurrection of Christ and think about why it is such a big deal. Earthquakes have been in the news a lot lately, most recently in Japan, of course. I'm going to talk on Easter Sunday about "*The Great Easter Earthquake.*" Extend an invitation to someone for one or both of these Sundays – someone you know who appears to not have a relationship with God, or someone who has no church connection or has stopped going to church for some reason.

Share the blessings of Faith – the blessings of God's grace – with someone you know, invite them to join you – even better, bring them with you to hear the message of God's power and grace, and to experience His grace and power in their lives. That is my plea to you today.

Now, let's look together at the Word of God as we find it in John 8:1-11.

This passage gives us a picture of grace in high definition. Grace in HD. I know basically nothing about the technology, but I can tell the difference between a snowy, fuzzy, or wavy TV picture and HD. The first television Mary Sue and I had when we got married back in the 1970s was a little 13-inch, black-and-white model. It didn't have rabbit ears, just one adjustable antenna with which to try to get a clear picture. We were grateful to have that TV. We used it in our apartments in Edinboro, PA, Ashland, OH, Princeton, NJ, and Exton, PA, and as a second TV after we moved to Altoona, PA. But there is no comparison between that little black-and-white and today's HD (and even 3-D) technology.

The same kind of thing is true of grace. We can talk about the meaning of grace until the cows come home. We can look at it from different angles and through different lenses. Sometimes, though, the picture is blurry. Sometimes our vision of grace is clouded by troubles which enter our lives uninvited. Because our lives get complicated, it is sometimes difficult to get grace clearly in focus. Then we see Jesus, the incarnation of grace and wisdom, love and compassion (because He is God incarnate), and all the blurriness, all the snow, all the interference, and all the shadows disappear, giving us a picture of grace that is absolutely brilliant in clarity. Like the high definition picture of grace we see as this woman caught in the act of adultery is dragged before Jesus in John 8. This is grace in HD, which is what you get with Jesus.

There is probably a note in your Bible at either the beginning or end of this passage indicating that these verses – from verse 53 of John 7 through verse 11 of John 8 – are not found in most of the oldest copies of the New Testament. So, most biblical scholars do not think this passage was originally part of the Gospel of John. But many of them do believe – and I join them in the belief – that this incident really did happen and really was a part of the ministry of Jesus. F. F. Bruce asserts that these verses “constitute ... a fragment of authentic gospel material not originally included in any of the four Gospels.” My old seminary professor, Bruce Metzger, the foremost expert in the world on the text of the New Testament in the last 100 years, concluded that though these verses may not have been an original part of John's Gospel, “the account has all the earmarks of historical veracity.” Metzger has lots of company in his conclusion. You can be confident that what is described here really took place. And the picture we are given here of the grace Jesus extended to this woman in her

utter embarrassment, in her guilt and shame and fear, is a true and accurate picture of God's grace. It is unmistakable. It is grace in HD. Can you see it clearly?

Let's look at some of the details. After spending the night under the stars on the Mount of Olives, Jesus was back in the temple court at dawn the next morning – earlier than the start of our early service on Sundays (8:30 AM). And Jesus wasn't alone. "Swarms of people came to Him," is the way *The Message* puts it (8:2). While Jesus was teaching, a group of Pharisees and religion scholars showed up with a woman they had apprehended in the act of adultery. They caught her having sexual relations with someone other than her husband, which was a serious offense under the law of Moses. In fact, it was a capital offense, punishable by death. In our culture, at least for some influential segments of our culture (such as the entertainment world and popular magazines), for a lot of people, adultery is no big deal. Sexual promiscuity has become normalized. Hook-ups among college and even high school students are largely expected. "Friends with benefits" are commonplace. The number of couples living together outside of marriage and the number of babies born to unmarried couples have increased geometrically in the last 40 years. If you listen to the voices of popular culture, having sex outside of marriage is the norm, whether you're married or not. Saving sexual intimacy for marriage, and only for marriage, is considered hopelessly old-school. What a mess.

Adultery was a big deal in Jesus' day. Adultery is still a big deal in God's eyes. Sexual sin of any kind is a big deal to God. It was then. It is now. But it is not the only kind of sin that is a big deal to God. If we go on a crusade against sexual sin but sweep other sins under the rug, God will not give His blessing.

You can tell there is something wrong with the picture as this woman caught in the act is paraded before Jesus. You can smell something fishy, can't you? Doesn't it take two to commit adultery? If they caught her in the act, where is the man who was with her? For all we know, it may have been one of the Pharisees they discovered with the woman, and his friends permitted him to escape. Whatever the case, it is obvious there was a double standard. Men usually got off easier than women. Which still happens today.

The woman's accusers didn't really care what happened to her. They were actually out to get Jesus. The whole thing was a set up, a plot hatched by the religious leaders to trap Jesus into saying something they could use against Him. They reminded Jesus that the Mosaic law prescribed death by stoning for adulterers. But Roman law forbade the Jews from carrying out executions. By pitting Moses and Rome against each other, the religious leaders thought they had Jesus right where they wanted Him – stuck between a rock and a hard place, with no way out. If He said they should go ahead and stone her to death, He could get in trouble with Rome. If He said the woman should be spared the death penalty, or if He tried to let her off the hook, they would accuse Him of undermining and overruling the law of God. It was a tight spot. All eyes were on Jesus.

Do you remember what Jesus did? Without speaking a word, He bent down and began to write in the dirt with His finger. This is the only place in the Bible that refers to Jesus writing. Do you know what He wrote in the dirt? Some people think He was listing the sins of the

religious leaders who were trying to trap Him. Could be, but we don't know for sure. The Bible doesn't say. While He was writing, the religious leaders seemed to think He was stalling for time. They kept prodding Him, pressing Him, badgering Him (*The Message*) for an answer. The whole crowd was wondering: WWJS? What would Jesus say?

What *did* Jesus say? You know His answer. What He said pierced the consciences of those self-righteous legalists like a dagger. Was the woman standing before Jesus guilty of adultery? Evidently. Was she a sinner who deserved the judgment of God for her sin? Yes. Just like me. And you. But the fact that the scribes and Pharisees could not honestly claim to be without sin disqualified each of them from carrying out the judgment of the law against her. One by one, the woman's accusers quietly slipped away, until no one was left but the woman and Jesus.

The scribes and Pharisees, in their eagerness to judge this woman, and to neutralize or even destroy the ministry of Jesus, showed themselves to be what they were: masters of ungrace. They could not stomach the compassion, the mercy and kindness Jesus extended to "sinners," to prostitutes and tax collectors and all the undesirables of that day. The religious leaders weren't into grace. They were into trumpeting their own righteousness, and judging and condemning others who didn't meet their standards.

The message of the Bible, however, is that Jesus did not come into the world to judge the world or to condemn us; He came to save us (John 3:17; 12:47). He came to forgive us. He came to release us. He came to set us free. He came to give us new life. He came to transform us. How? By His free and sovereign grace.

He did not condemn this woman caught in adultery, guilty as she was. Instead of condemnation, mercy and grace. Instead of rejection, forgiveness. Did she deserve it? Of course not. These are gifts which come free of charge to guilty sinners who do not and will never deserve them.

I want you to notice what Jesus did not say to the woman. He did not say to her: "Leave your life of sin, and then I will forgive you." That would be the equivalent of our saying to someone, to anyone: "Clean up your life, and then we'll be glad to welcome you to our church."

Dear friends, No! No! A thousand times No! That is not the way of Jesus. It is not the way of grace. In refusing to condemn her, Jesus did not condone this woman's sin. He did not excuse her sin. He did not brush it aside as if to say: "Come on. It's just adultery. It's really not a big deal." No way. Jesus said to her: "You are forgiven. Guilty? Yes. But forgiven. And free. For those who receive my grace and trust in me, there is no condemnation. My grace is greater than your sin. Now, because you are forgiven, leave your life of sin." Grace comes first.

That is grace. It is grace in crystal clear HD. It is grace for you and me. It is a beautiful thing.

But, listen, there is more to this. This is not just about the grace of God for you and me. It is about the church's mission to be a haven of grace for people whose lives are a mess, people who struggle with and give in to desires and addictions and behaviors we deplore, people (like this woman caught in an adulterous liaison) who have done things or made choices we know are morally wrong, people with whom (Father, forgive us) we would rather not have to associate. We need to talk more about this another time.

It is to this kind of grace, to this ministry of grace, that the God of all grace has called us. Grace is not reserved for "respectable people." It is not reserved for religious people. Jesus wants us to open the door of grace to sinners of all kinds, including those we find it hardest to love. That is our mission individually as followers of Christ. It is our mission as a church. It is possible only by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

Grace in high definition, like the grace Jesus showed to this woman. Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.