

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 5, 2011**

**THE BENEFITS OF GRACE:  
Unrestricted Access to the Throne of Grace**

**Romans 5:1-2; Hebrews 4:14-16**

We are looking at the benefits of God's grace – that is, the particular blessings given to those who have been justified (declared righteous) in the sight of God by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God, who incarnated the love of God and gave His life for us on the cross, in order to redeem us from our sins and reconcile us to God. The first of these benefits, as we saw last Sunday, is *peace with God* (Romans 5:1). This gift of peace with God is exactly that – a gift. It is not earned. It is not achieved. It cannot be bought. It is a gift of grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Peace with God comes only through the grace of God – the saving, redeeming, forgiving, life-changing grace we experience through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. As Paul might say, this is a trustworthy saying.

Today we look at the second benefit Paul identifies here in Romans 5, which is the blessing of *access by faith into this grace in which we now stand* (5:2). It is by grace and grace alone that we are saved and made right with God (Ephesians 2:5, 8). As if this weren't enough by itself, Paul says that through faith in Jesus and His saving work on our behalf, we have been given the privilege of access to grace – ongoing access to the grace we need each moment and each day to live in fellowship with God as faithful and joy-filled followers of the Lord Jesus, and to endure the troubles and trials and temptations which are part of life. Grace is not just a one-time experience. Nor is it a place we get to visit only on special occasions. Paul is saying that because we have been accepted by God through the saving work of His Son, we are not standing in a place of grace. We *live* in the land of grace.

If you go to Memphis, where our EPC General Assembly will be held in a few weeks, you can visit Graceland, the former home of Elvis Presley, who departed this life the same year Mary Sue and I were married (1977). I'm sure it is an interesting place to visit, especially if you're a fan of "the King." But here is the thing: As followers of Christ who have been justified by His grace, Graceland is not just a place to visit. Graceland is where we live. Not the one in Memphis. The true Graceland. The spiritual one. We live in the land of God's grace. If you have been saved by grace and the Holy Spirit lives in you, if you have been adopted into God's family through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, then Graceland is your home. You have been given the privilege of access – unlimited, unrestricted access – to the throne of grace, as it says in Hebrews 4:16. The throne of grace is the throne of God Himself, for He is "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10). The grace we need is always available. And the grace God gives is always sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9). Always.

In this world, access to powerful or important people is almost always restricted. You cannot just walk up to the White House without an invitation, knock on the front door, and expect to have a chat with the president. It doesn't work that way. You cannot simply show up at the White House for a state dinner uninvited, and just walk in, although, as the whole world

knows, Tareq and Michael Salahi managed to do it when President Obama held his first state dinner in 2009. You cannot have an audience with the Pope or tea with the Queen of England unless you are invited. Access is limited. It is restricted.

As many of you know through your own experience in the military or government service, you have to have the proper security clearance in order to have access to classified information and restricted areas.

Fifty years ago this year, in 1961, when segregation still reigned in the South, the Freedom Riders – both black and white, both men and women – rode buses to the deep South to protest the policies and practices of race prejudice which denied “coloreds,” as our African-American brothers and sisters were often called, access to places, facilities, services, and opportunities, all because of the color of their skin. The Freedom Riders’ call for an end to discrimination on the basis of race, one part of the larger Civil Rights movement in America, was met with hostility, hatred, violence and time in jail for many of the Freedom Riders. But it was not a lost cause, praise God. Their efforts were not in vain, praise God. Yes, our society is still far from perfect when it comes to racial matters. In some places, African-Americans still experience discrimination. They are still not always given the same access to opportunity and services that others of us enjoy. That is something I think Jesus would be concerned about. It is something I think Jesus *is* concerned about. And something Jesus wants the church to be concerned about.

The color of one’s skin makes no difference to God with respect to having access to His grace. His grace is available to anyone and everyone who comes to Him in faith. There is not one line for whites, another for “coloreds,” another for Asians, another for Hispanics, and yet another for Arabs, and so on. In His grace, by His grace expressed in the person and work of His Son, our Savior, God has given to all who trust in Him the privilege of unrestricted access to His presence and grace.

Before the death of Jesus on the cross, only the Jewish high priest, and he only once a year, could enter the holiest place in the Temple, which symbolized the presence of God. When Jesus died, the curtain covering the entrance to the Holy of Holies was torn in half from top to bottom, showing that access to God is now open to anyone who comes to Him in a spirit of true repentance and faith. This access to God, this freedom to draw near to God with confidence, is possible only when our sins have been forgiven. It is possible only through grace – the grace of Christ in which we now stand.

Here is another illustration from the Bible. Remember the dramatic story of Esther in the Old Testament? After deposing his wife, Queen Vashti, for insubordination (she had refused to obey an order given by the king when he had had too much to drink), Xerxes, the king of Persia, chose Esther as his new queen, not knowing that Esther (also known as Hadassah) was Jewish. One of King Xerxes’ closest advisers, Haman, concocted a plot to wipe out all the Jews everywhere in the empire. This may have been the first attempt in history to completely destroy the Jewish people – the first “final solution” – but we know it was not the last. Without bothering to find out what Haman was really up to, King Xerxes issued an edict condemning all the Jews in the empire to death on a certain date. When Esther’s older cousin,

Mordecai, learned of it, he sent word of the edict to Queen Esther, urging her to go to the king to plead for mercy on behalf of all her people. But Esther knew the law of the land. She knew how risky it would be. She sent a message back to Mordecai, saying: “Everyone here in the palace, and everywhere in the whole kingdom, for that matter, knows there is a single fate for anyone – man or woman – who approaches the king without being invited: death. The one exception is if the king extends his gold scepter; then that person may live” (Esther 4:11, adapted from *The Message*).

She would be risking her life to approach the king. In addition, for whatever reason, the king had not called for her in a month. (Judge for yourself what that probably says about their marriage.) Esther feared that she would be met not with grace but with wrath. But Mordecai, knowing it was a life and death matter for all the Jewish people, pressed her to go to the king, which she agreed to do, even if it resulted in her death. When, after three days of fasting and prayer, Esther appeared in the court of the king, Xerxes was pleased to see her, and he held out to her the gold scepter. If you know the story, you know that in due time, both Haman’s evil conspiracy to slaughter the Jews and Mordecai’s previously unrewarded heroism were brought into the light. Like Osama bin Laden only five weeks ago, Haman received justice. He got what he deserved. He was hanged on a gallows he had intended to use to kill Mordecai. King Xerxes issued a second edict, giving the Jews the right to defend themselves against any and all enemies. And God gave them victory. In His sovereign power and love, God protected His people from harm. He kept them safe. To accomplish His purposes, God prompted and enabled a young woman named Esther to put her life on the line by approaching the king uninvited, by daring to enter the king’s presence when she knew it could cost her life. She wasn’t living in Graceland. She was in Persia.

But you and I do live in Graceland. We don’t have to wonder or worry about whether our heavenly Father will extend the gold scepter of His mercy and grace to us. Because of Jesus and His ministry as our great High Priest, offering the perfect, once-for-all, acceptable sacrifice of Himself to atone for our sins, we now have the privilege of unrestricted access to the throne of grace. We can draw near to the throne of God Himself not with fear, not with timidity or uncertainty, but with confidence, with a holy blend of humility and boldness, to receive the mercy and grace God has for us. Maybe you can’t get in to see the president any time you want, but you have continuous access to the God of the whole universe. Do you see how big that is?

His mercy and grace are always available. 24/7. In and through Christ, we have unlimited and unrestricted access to the throne of grace, unlimited and unrestricted access to the God of grace, unlimited and unrestricted access to the grace of God we need in every situation. *For* every situation. Whatever it is in your life, His grace is available. And His grace is enough. Today. Right now.

If the Lord Jesus lives in you by faith, then you are living in Graceland. So do not hesitate to approach the throne of grace with confidence and courage, in order to receive the good things God desires to give you.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.