

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 4, 2011**

## **THE GRACE EFFECT**

**Titus 2:11-14**

### **A GRACE EPIPHANY**

Do you know what the word “epiphany” means? Generically, an epiphany is a moment of sudden insight or understanding, when the light goes on in your mind or heart and suddenly you grasp the meaning of something you didn’t “get” before, or something you couldn’t figure out all of a sudden becomes clear to you. Have you ever had that kind of an epiphany? Maybe in math or science class? Or in some do-it-yourself home improvement project? Or maybe in your marriage? Or in your relationship with your kids? Or maybe in your relationship with your parents? I’ll bet you have, somewhere along the way.

“Epiphany” also has a distinctive meaning for Christians. In the liturgical calendar of the Christian year, Epiphany is a special day which commemorates the appearance of the long-awaited Messiah, the Christ child, to the wise men who followed a star to Bethlehem to find and worship Jesus, and to give Him gifts worthy of a king (Matthew 2:1-12). The Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Protestant Reformation which follow the liturgical calendar observe Epiphany each year on January 6, twelve days after Christmas. In celebrating the visit of the wise men from the east to Jesus during His infancy, it marks the first appearance or manifestation of the Son of God to Gentiles (non-Jews), because these wise men, or Magi, were the first non-Jews to see the incarnate Son of God following His birth in Bethlehem.

Even though the observance of Epiphany doesn’t come until after Christmas, and this is just the second Sunday of Advent, with 21 days still to go until Christmas, I mention Epiphany today because of what Paul writes in Titus 2. Listen again to what he says in verse 11: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men” (NIV). Another translation (ESV) says: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people.”

If you know your grammar, you know the subject of verse 11 is what? It is the grace of God, which comes free of charge to people like you and me who don’t deserve it, and never will. It is the free and unmerited favor of God shown to sinful men and women who could never in a gazillion years extricate ourselves from our sinful nature and make ourselves deserving of God’s approval. It is this grace, Paul says, that brings salvation to all people. It is by grace, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9, by God’s grace, that we are saved, through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who gave His life for us on the cross. This salvation from sin is not something we can achieve or accomplish by our most determined efforts. It is not something we can earn. It is a gift. A gift from God. And it is available to anyone and everyone who will accept it as a gift.

In his book *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner paints a word picture of God’s grace as a gift God gives not because of anything we have ever done to deserve it or

anything we will ever do, but simply because of who God is and His love for us. It is a gift. But, says Buechner, “there’s only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you’ll reach out and take it.” Then, in what we might call an epiphany of spiritual insight, he says: “Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift, too.”

It is something to think about. If you have never reached out to God in faith to accept the gift of salvation He offers to you through the suffering and death of His Son on your behalf, let today be the day. Do not receive the message of God’s grace in vain, but let today be the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:1-2). If you’re not sure you have the faith needed to believe the gospel and to receive the gift of salvation, ask God to give you the faith to believe in the Lord Jesus and the sufficiency of His saving work for you. Ask God to enable you to reach out in faith to take hold of this gift of grace. Lord, let it be so. Yes, Lord, let it be so. Right here. Right now. In this place.

What does Paul say about this grace of God that brings salvation? He says “it has appeared,” which translates the word *epephane*, from the Greek verb *epiphaino*. In other words, there has been an epiphany of grace. An epiphany or manifestation of God’s grace has taken place. Do you see what Paul is talking about? He is talking about the incarnation. He is talking about the coming of God to dwell among us. He is talking about God Himself taking on our flesh and blood, and making His home among us here on earth in the person of His Son Jesus Christ. The incarnation was an epiphany of grace, for Jesus incarnated the grace of God. Jesus personified and embodied God’s amazing grace. He was grace incarnate, grace in the flesh, because He was God incarnate. The gospel truth of which Paul reminds both Titus and us is that the incarnation of God’s grace has appeared (*epephane*), bringing salvation to all who will receive Him. Which includes you and me.

### **GRACE THAT TRAINS**

If verse 11 focuses on the epiphany or appearance of grace in the fullness of time, verse 12 speaks of the effect of God’s grace – or, at least, one of its effects in our lives and the lives of all who receive it. Not only is salvation a gift of grace. Not only are you and I saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone to the glory and praise of God alone, if we are truly saved. Paul says that the grace of God which saves us also trains us to turn away from a life of ungodliness and the pursuit of worldly passions and pleasures that always promise more than they deliver. Grace shows us the emptiness of putting anything else in the place that belongs to God alone. It shows us the folly of living life apart from God. It teaches us to say “No” to the lies of the world about where meaning and significance, purpose and peace in life are found. And, it trains us to live a grace-filled, God-centered and God-pleasing life.

That is the grace effect. It does not force on us a rigid and demanding form of legalism. It does not saddle us with an interminable set of rules and regulations to follow. God does not use His grace to threaten us or to beat us into submission. He does not present us with a list of demands we must satisfy in order to share in the blessings of His grace. No.

This is the grace effect: The grace that saves us changes us. It changes our hearts. It changes our desires. The effect of grace is that it changes the way we think and the way we live. It

shows us the emptiness of life without God or a life in opposition to God. The grace effect inspires us to live no longer for ourselves but for God, as an expression of our gratitude for His grace and the difference it has made in our lives. Do you see the grace effect? Have you experienced it in your life? Do you realize how amazing and far-reaching it is? How far-reaching it is meant to be?

The truth is that grace affects everything. Grace changes everything. It frees us from our captivity to sin and guilt. It changes us from the inside out. It gives us a power for living that only God can give. And, as Paul says in verse 13, it gives us hope for the future – “the blessed hope of the appearing” (there is the word *epiphaneia*) again) “of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

### **GRACE GIVES HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**

Do you see the connection here between Advent and Epiphany? In the season of Advent, we look back to remember the first advent of coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to us in the incarnation. We celebrate His first epiphany, beginning with His birth in Bethlehem. We also look forward in anticipation and hope to the promise of His coming again – “personally, visibly, and bodily,” as we confess in the Essentials of Our Faith, “to judge the living and the dead, and to consummate history and the eternal plan of God.” There is a future epiphany yet to come, and our hearts cry out with the apostle John in the next to last verse in the whole Bible: “Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

The grace effect gives us hope for the future as we wait in the present. It gives us hope for the future while we struggle with disappointment, hurt, pain, loss, and heartache in this present life in a fallen world. It gives us hope because of what Jesus has already done for us: He “gave Himself for us” – the best Christmas gift we could ever receive – to redeem us from all lawlessness and rebellion through the ransom He paid with His own blood, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works (2:14).

### **THE PURPOSE OF CHRIST’S EPIPHANY**

To redeem us was the purpose for which Jesus came. In His own words, He said that He came “to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). Which is what He did for us in His suffering and death for us on the cross.

It is the blood of Jesus, as John says in 1 John 1, that “purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” But if we confess our sins, how does God respond? “He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:7-9). This is the purpose for which Jesus appeared. It was the purpose of His epiphany. And, don’t you see, it is all grace. All by grace.

### **HIS VERY OWN PEOPLE**

Jesus came to make us a people who are His very own. As most of you know, a member of our church family, Pat Marino, was a member of the United States Marine Band for

something like 26 years. I don't need to tell you, do I that you've got to be really, really, really good to be in the Marine Band – or in the Army Band, like Dan Franssell and Beth Mailand were, and Karl Mailand still is, or in the Navy Band, like Rebecca McClelland. You probably know what they call the Marine Band. It is called “The President's Own.” The Marine Band has a special connection and a special relationship with the president of the United States. In a symbolic way, the band is “the President's own.”

Because of His grace given to us, we are now “Christ's own people.” We are His possession. We belong to Him. We are included in His family. We are His adopted sons and daughters. We are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care. He has made us His very own. And it is all by grace. It is all by grace, which, as you know, comes free of charge to people who do not, cannot, and will not ever deserve it. Like you and me.

There is one more grace effect we must not miss at the end of verse 14. Grace makes us eager – zealous – to do good works. It makes us full of zeal to serve God by doing good to others. If we really understand the grace we have been given, it will inspire us and propel us to show grace- and mercy and love and kindness – to others.

### **WHERE CAN I GET A HEART LIKE YOURS?**

A story in closing: Near the end of a Saturday community service day, as 50 or so volunteers from a local church in a city in another state, all wearing identical yellow T-shirts, were streaming out of their worksite after doing a complete makeover of a house, a man from the church, walking toward the worksite, passed a couple who were working in their own yard. The “church guy” paused to compliment the woman on her roses, and she asked what was going on down the street. The church guy replied that a group of churches had banded together in their desire to serve their community. As they continued to talk, the husband, seeing the church guy's yellow T-shirt, put down the weed-whacker he had been using and walked over to join the conversation. Nodding approvingly toward the renovated house down the street, he said: “I love your heart. Where can I get a heart like yours?”

Wow! How would you answer a question like that? The church guy simply said: “We got our hearts from Jesus, and He would be glad to give you one like His, too.”

That is the grace effect. That is what grace does, the grace which became flesh and appeared in the incarnation, in the coming of the Son of God to redeem us, to purify us, and to make us His very own people. As a gift of His grace, God gives us a new heart. A heart that is eager to live for Him. A heart that is zealous to do good to others as an expression of our devotion and gratitude to Him.

How I pray that we may love and serve one another, and love and serve those in need all around us, so that people who see our lives will be moved to say: “I love your heart. Where can I get a heart like yours?” May we, at every opportunity, point others to the Lord Jesus and His grace. Lord, let it be so. Amen.