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**SERMONS
I LIKE
TO
PREACH**
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DAVID ROPER

Amazing Grace

Ephesians 2:8, 9

Ephesians 2:8, 9 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.” The plan of God for our salvation is outlined in the phrase “by grace you have been saved through faith.” “By grace” summarizes all God did for us in sending His Son, giving us the Bible, etc. “Through faith” summarizes all we do to appropriate God’s gift: trust, love, and obedience (including baptism). At times, I have taught on one aspect of what God has done or what we are to do. In this lesson, we want to concentrate on the broad theme of the grace of God.¹

Many great passages in the Bible focus on the subject of the grace of God, such as Ephesians 2:8, 9.² Here are several more:

... being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24).

In Him [Jesus] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses,

¹This lesson is based on a sermon preached by Wayne Kilpatrick during a gospel meeting at the Westside church of Christ in Duncan, Oklahoma, 18 March 1986. Brother Kilpatrick graciously consented to allow it to be included in this issue.

²Grace is primarily a New Testament topic. It is mentioned about thirteen times in the Old Testament, but ten times as often in the New Testament. We should not be surprised at the increasing emphasis on grace: “For the Law was given through Moses” but “grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

according to the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:7)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men (Titus 2:11).

What do these passages have in common? All say that we are saved *by grace*.

“WHAT YOU NEED”

If we are to be saved by grace, we need to know what grace is. One dictionary defined grace as “a manifestation of favor comparable to mercy or clemency.” That definition is hard to understand and hard to remember. A better definition is: “freely given and unmerited favor and love from God.” I have often used the phrase “unmerited favor” to help people understand the concept of grace. In this lesson, however, I want to give you a definition that everyone can remember, even the children: “*Grace is what you need, but don’t deserve.*”

That definition comes from a story: Years ago, Dr. S. M. Lindsay taught a group of young boys in a Bible school in Scotland. One Sunday morning he taught on Ephesians 2:8, 9. Trying to explain what grace is, he shared definitions he had found: “A manifestation of favor comparable to mercy or clemency”; “Freely given and unmerited favor and love.” Neither of these seemed to make an impression on his students. Finally he said, “Grace is what you need, but don’t deserve.” The students still struggled with the meaning of grace, but the doctor comforted

himself by saying he had tried.

The next afternoon Dr. Lindsay was invited to a formal tea. He dressed in striped trousers, long-tailed coat, and spats. He also put on his tall stovepipe hat.

As he was going to the tea, one of his students, young Bobby, saw him and hid behind some bushes. It was early spring, and snow was still on the ground. Bobby picked up some of the wet snow and packed it until it was like ice. He took aim at the stovepipe hat and let fly. The snowball hit Dr. Lindsay in the ear. He staggered, and his hat fell in the mud. He was so addled that he "saw stars," but his vision cleared in time for him to see Bobby bolt from the shrubs and run toward his house.

Dr. Lindsay's first impulse was to catch Bobby and give him the spanking of his life. "But," he mused, "he's not my boy, so I can't do that." He decided that, right after the tea, he would go to Bobby's house, tell his mother and father, and then accompany them to the wood shed to make sure the job was done right.

As he walked to the tea, he shook his head. "That rascal! After all I've done for him. I thought he was my friend. Just last week I let him borrow my fishing pole because he doesn't have one. And then I take the time to try to teach him about God's Word every Sunday. Why, just last Sunday I was teaching the boys on. . . ." Suddenly, he had another thought.

After the tea, he went to the store and bought a new jointed fishing pole and had it wrapped. He went to Bobby's house. Bobby, who was watching out the window, saw him coming and disappeared. Bobby's mother came to the door. Dr. Lindsay handed her the package and said, "This is for Bobby for his birthday, even though I know it isn't for several months yet. Go ahead and give it to Bobby, and tell him, 'This is from Dr. Lindsay. He said, 'I know this is what you need.''" The mother said she would do as he requested, and the doctor went home.

About an hour later, there was a timid knock on Dr. Lindsay's door. When the doctor opened the door, there was Bobby, fishing pole in hand, lower lip quivering, a tear on his cheek. Bobby said, "Hello, Dr. Lindsay."

"Hello, Bobby."

"Uh, Dr. Lindsay. . . ."

"Yes, Bobby."

"You know that snowball that hit you today?"

"Yes, Bobby."

"Well . . . I done it!"

"And?"

"Well, if you'd known I done it, you wouldn't have given me this fishing pole."

"I *did* know that you hit me with the snowball. That's *why* I gave you the fishing pole."

"I . . . I don't understand."

"Do you remember what we studied about in class yesterday?"

"No."

"We studied about grace. Do you remember what I told you grace is?"

"No."

"Grace is *what we need but don't deserve*. Now, Bobby, you *deserve* a spanking. My ear is still ringing. My hat will have to be cleaned and blocked. But what you *need* is a fishing pole. This is an illustration of grace. I'm giving you what you need, but don't deserve. Now, Bobby, can you tell me what grace is?"

"Sure," Bobby said, grinning from ear to ear, "grace is a new jointed fishin' pole!"

Bobby still did not quite have it figured out, but he was getting closer: Grace is what we need, but do not deserve!

Think about it: What do we deserve spiritually? All of us are sinners. "There is none righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10); "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We read in 1 John 5:19 that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." Isaiah 53:6 says, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, . . ." As sinners, we *deserve* only spiritual death, eternal separation from the presence from God: "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a). However, what we *need* is "the free gift of God": "eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23b)!

"What you need, but don't deserve"—once you get that definition of grace in mind, you will see old and familiar stories in a new light. God's grace can be seen in passages that do not even use the word "grace."

WHAT THE PRODIGAL NEEDED (LUKE 15:11–24)

To illustrate what I mean, we will look one of the most familiar stories in the Bible: the story of

the prodigal son in Luke 15. You remember the story: A man had two sons. The younger son came to him and said, "Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me" (v. 12a). The father was not legally obligated to give the boy anything, but he gave him what he requested. The boy left home, leaving behind a brokenhearted father. In a foreign country, "he squandered his estate with loose living" (v. 13b). When he ended up in a pig pen, he at last "came to his senses" (v. 17a) and headed home. When he stood before his father again, he said to him: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (v. 21). In the terminology of our lesson, he was saying, "I no longer *deserve* to be called your son."

That boy was right. He had wasted his inheritance and hurt his family's name. He had broken his father's heart and perhaps impaired his own health. He deserved *nothing*. His father had every right to respond, "That is true. You are not worthy to be called my son. You made your decision to have nothing to do with me or this household; now live with it. Good-by!" Even in a compassionate mood, the father could have said, "What you say is true, but I cannot stand to see anyone suffer. Go to the servant quarters and report to the head servant. He will give you clothes to work in and show you where you can sleep. From this moment on, whenever you see me, bow low and say, 'Shalom, master.'" That is what the boy *deserved*.

On the other hand, what did he *need*? He needed clothes (his own were in tatters), so his father gave him a robe (v. 22). He needed shoes for his feet (bare feet signified slavery), so his father gave him sandals (v. 22). He needed food (he was starving), so his father killed the fattened calf (v. 23). He needed reassurance, so his father put a ring on his finger (v. 22), as a sign of authority.³ Above all, he needed to hear the words his father spoke: "*This son of mine* was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found" (v. 24; emphasis mine).

It is but a step from the life of the prodigal son to your life and mine. All of us started life at home with our Father, for we were born inno-

³Letters and special documents were sealed with the family ring. To be given this ring was roughly equivalent to a U.S. father letting his son use his credit card. A parallel illustration from your own country could be substituted.

cent (Matthew 18:3; Ezekiel 18:20). As we grew older, we came to the age when we were accountable for our acts. We then sinned (Romans 3:23)—and in that sinning, we left the Father (Isaiah 59:1, 2)! Some who go away do not stay long; they return to the Lord almost immediately. Others stay a long time before they come back home. Some are still in the far country of sin.

When we decide to come home, the amazing thing is that God hastens to meet us even as the father ran to meet the prodigal son. We deserve only spiritual death, but God forgives us and calls us sons and daughters (2 Corinthians 6:18)! That is why we sing:

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound!
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.⁴

I remember a twelve-year-old boy living in Lone Wolf, Oklahoma, in 1947. He had thought often about obeying the gospel. When he asked his mother if he was old enough to become a Christian, she replied, "If you have to ask me, you are not ready. When you are ready, you will know it." I can see that boy sweeping out the bus shed after school, struggling with whether or not he should be baptized. Finally, it was time for the annual summer gospel meeting. Brother Vaughn had been asked to do the preaching; brother Christian had agreed to do the song-leading. The meeting was held outdoors, behind the small frame building where the church met. One night, during the meeting, the boy made up his mind. When the invitation song began, he started down the grassy aisle; he felt as if his feet were six inches above the ground. After the service, some of the brethren took him ten miles away to Hobart, Oklahoma, where the church building had a baptistery. A servant of the Lord lowered him under the water and then raised him up. As he stood there, water running from his hair and face, he was saved and sanctified—a member of the Lord's church, a Christian—with all the blessings of a child of God and the hope of heaven!⁵ I assure you, that boy had not received what he *deserved*, but what he *needed*!

⁴John Newton, "Amazing Grace."

⁵As you probably guessed, I refer to myself.

God had received him back home by grace!

WHAT THE WOUNDED MAN NEEDED (LUKE 10:30–35)

Let us turn next to the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. To appreciate this story, we must understand something about the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. Simply put, the Jews hated the Samaritans (John 4:9).⁶ If a Jew saw a Samaritan coming down the street, he would cross to the other side. If there was no time to cross, he would back against the wall and fold his clothing about him. When the Samaritan was even with him, he would spit in his direction. If the Samaritan accidentally brushed against him, he would jump back and brush any “Samaritan dust” from his clothing. If a Samaritan woman were having trouble giving birth, a Jewish man or woman would not help. The Jew would hope that the mother and her baby would die, leaving two fewer Samaritans to plague the earth.

Keep that relationship between Jews and Samaritans in mind as we review the story. “A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho” (v. 30a). Jesus’ listeners would have understood that the man was Jewish. The man “fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead” (v. 30b). A priest came along (perhaps the very one who had recently accepted the man’s sacrifice in the temple), but “when he saw him, he passed by on the other side” (v. 31b). Then a Levite came by (the Levites were the priests’ assistants), and he also “passed by on the other side” (v. 32b). Finally, “a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him” (v. 33a).

I do not know if the Samaritan had come from Jerusalem or Jericho, but in either city, he would have been treated as described earlier. Jews would have expressed their contempt in dozens of hateful ways. As that Samaritan looked down upon the man bruised and bleeding by the side of the road, what—in the mind of the Samaritan—would that Jew have *deserved*? To answer that, suppose that a neighbor crossed the street every time he saw you, spat in your direc-

⁶This hatred was mutual, and Samaritans also mistreated Jews. In this lesson, however, we are concerned about only one side of this relationship.

tion, or refused to help your wife when her life was in danger. What would *you* think he deserved?

On the other hand, what did the wounded man *need*? He needed someone to take compassion on him (v. 33b). He needed someone to pour oil and wine on his wounds (v. 34a).⁷ He needed someone to take him to shelter (v. 34b). He needed continued care until he was well again (v. 35). The Samaritan gave him what he needed, not what he deserved. The good Samaritan practiced grace.

Again, it is but a step from that story to my life and yours. Like the Jews, we sometimes fail to act like God’s people. When we become Christians, we promise God that we will watch our walk, our talk, our friends, where we go, and how we use our time. We have not always kept our promises. Perhaps, like the Jews, we have been hateful to other people. Our hearts may even be full of prejudice. Beaten down by our failures and wounded by our sins, we lie bleeding and helpless by the side of life’s road. We have insulted the Lord by our disobedience; we do not deserve His help. Thank God, however, like the good Samaritan, He does not give us what we deserve, but what we need. If we will bring Him our broken hearts in penitence (1 John 1:9; Acts 8:22), He will pour out His grace and mercy upon us and heal our souls (Psalm 23:5)!⁸ “Amazing grace! how sweet the sound! . . .”

WHAT THE SOLDIERS NEEDED (2 KINGS 6:8–23)

Now let us consider a less familiar story in 2 Kings 6. The king of Aram⁹ was warring against Israel.¹⁰ He had spied out the situation; he knew where the army of Israel was camping, where the Israelites were drawing water, and so on. He sent his army to a place where he was sure the

⁷The oil and wine would clean the wound, seal it from the air, and hasten the healing process.

⁸Please note that I am drawing several parallels between the parable of the good Samaritan and the needs of wayward Christians. I am not suggesting that *Jesus* gave the parable to teach all these lessons. Jesus had one basic aim in mind: to teach that *anybody* in need was our “neighbor” and should be helped.

⁹The KJV, RSV, and several other translations have “Syria.” Syria/Aram was north of Palestine.

¹⁰This was during the Divided Kingdom, so the term “Israel” refers to the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Israelite army would be, but when his soldiers got there, the Israelites were gone. This happened again and again, until it could no longer be coincidence. He called his military leaders and asked, in effect, "Which of you is a spy?" (See v. 11.) They quickly replied that they had not warned the Israelites. Rather, they told the king of God's prophet in Israel: "No, my lord, O king; but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom" (v. 12).

The king of Aram sent his army to capture the prophet. In the night, they surrounded the town of Dothan, where the prophet was staying. The next morning, when the servant of the prophet went outside, he saw the sunlight glinting off the spears of the Aramean army. Terrified, he ran inside. "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" (v. 15).¹¹ Elisha prayed that the eyes of his servant might be opened. "And . . . he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (v. 17). Then, when the Aramean army came to capture him, the prophet prayed that the eyes of the soldiers might be closed—and the Lord struck them with blindness. Elisha told them, "Follow me and I will bring you to the man whom you seek" (v. 19b). The prophet led them down the road to the capital city, down the main street, up to the palace of the king of Israel. Then he prayed that they might see again. When their eyes were opened, they were surrounded by the army of Israel!

When the king saw that the army of Aram had fallen into his hands, he was ecstatic. I can see him jumping up and down with excitement as he asked the prophet, "My father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?" (v. 21). They deserved death. They were enemies of God's people and they had come to destroy God's prophet. However, the prophet replied, "You shall not kill them. Would you kill those you have taken captive with your sword and with your bow?" (v. 22a). I can imagine the king responding, "No, I would keep them captive. Good! I will set up a prison camp for these prisoners until the war

with Aram is over!" They deserved at least this. However, Elisha instructed: "Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink" (v. 22b). I imagine the king was puzzled. Was this to be the prisoners "last meal"?¹² Maybe he replied, "All right. I'll feed them and *then* imprison them." However, the prophet said, "Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink *and go to their master*" (v. 22b, c; emphasis mine). They *deserved* to die, but they *needed* a second opportunity.

The king "prepared a great feast for them" (v. 23a)—a banquet in their honor. I do not know how well the Aramean soldiers ate; they may have suspected the food was poisoned. Then, "when they had eaten and drunk he sent them away" (v. 23b). As they left, they probably kept looking over their shoulders, expecting a shower of arrows at any moment. After a while, however, it was obvious that they really were being allowed to go home, "and they went to their master" (v. 23c).

As they came into Aram, the word would have gone out: "The army is back!" As they marched into the palace grounds, the king would have come out. I can imagine the strange dialogue that must have ensued:

The king asked the commanding officer, "Did you find the prophet?"

"Yes, we did."

"Did you kill him?"

"No."

"Did you bring him back?"

"No."

Looking puzzled, the king said, "If you found him, why *didn't* you kill him or bring him back?"

The captain replied, "You had better sit down, sir, because you are *not* going to believe this!"

Look at the dramatic sequel to this story: "And the marauding bands of Arameans did not come again into the land of Israel" (v. 23d). That is not man's way to end a war, but that was God's way!

Many wars are being waged today. No, I am not referring to the clashes between nations that

¹¹Application can be made at this point regarding our feeling overwhelmed as the servant did: We may feel alone in our homes, at school, at work, in our neighborhoods. We may think that we are the only ones trying to do right.

¹²In the U.S. and other places, traditionally, a condemned criminal gets to order anything he wants for his last meal before his execution.

make the newspaper headlines. I am referring to the wars in our homes, in our communities, in our congregations. Many of these wars could be resolved if we would only learn to practice grace. Is it not true that we tend to give people what we think they *deserve*? Someone hurts our feelings, and we think we must hurt them in return. Someone mistreats us, and we think we have a right to mistreat them. What would happen if we gave people not what they deserve, but what they need? Consider this: Generally, those who *need* love the most are those who appear to *deserve* it the least. If, like Elisha, we gave people what they needed instead of what they deserved, what a difference it could make in our relationships!

WHAT AN ADULTEROUS WOMAN NEEDED (JOHN 8:1–11)

We have noted two parables by Jesus that demonstrate how grace can be (and should be) expressed. We must realize that Jesus not only *taught* about grace, but He also *practiced* it. For instance, in John 8, we read about a woman who was brought to Jesus after she had been taken in the act of adultery.¹³ What did she *deserve*? According to the law of Moses, she should have been stoned to death (v. 5). On the contrary, what did she *need*? She needed to hear Jesus say, “Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more” (v. 11b).

WHAT ZACCHEUS NEEDED (LUKE 19:1–10)

On another occasion, which we read about in Luke 19, Jesus was passing through Jericho. Crowds packed the streets. He was a popular man and surely had dozens of invitations to eat in the homes of the most prestigious citizens. There was one man in Jericho, however, who seemingly *deserved* Jesus less than anyone else,

¹³Space does not permit me to tell this story in detail. You may, however, want to take the time to tell the story in detail. You can note that the only one who had a right to cast a stone at her was Jesus, for He was the only one without sin, but He said, “Neither do I condemn you” and “From now on sin no more.” On his desk, one preacher keeps an ugly rock labeled “The First Stone.” When people come to him to talk about their sins, he says, “Since I have sin in my own life, I am not going to cast the first stone. I am not here to condemn you, but to help you get the sin out of your life.”

but *needed* him the most: a little man named Zaccheus, who climbed a tree to see Jesus as He passed.¹⁴ When Jesus went home with Zaccheus, they could probably hear the crowd murmuring: “But he is the biggest sinner in town!” Zaccheus needed the opportunity to make his life right with God (v. 8). He needed to hear Jesus say, “Today salvation has come to this house, . . . For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (vv. 9, 10).

WHAT THE JEWS NEEDED (LUKE 23:33–46; ACTS 2:14–41, 47)

The greatest expression of grace came at the end of Jesus’ personal ministry. He was beaten, nailed to a cross, and mocked.¹⁵ What did those who had mistreated Jesus *deserve*? They deserved a lightning bolt from heaven; they deserved instant annihilation—but what did they *need*? They needed Jesus’ prayer: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34a).

The prayer of Jesus was answered fifty days later, on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1). Peter stood up, pointed his finger at the Jews, and said, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus *whom you crucified*” (v. 36; emphasis mine). When his listeners heard this, “they were pierced to the heart” and cried out, “Brethren, what shall we do?” (v. 37). What did they *deserve*? They deserved a reply like this: “There is nothing you can do! You killed the Son of God! Now you must live the rest of your life with that guilt!” What did these people *need*? They needed Peter to say, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins [including the sin of killing the Messiah]; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (v. 38)! When they heard those words, three thousand were baptized that very day and were saved by the grace of God (vv. 41, 47)—not because they deserved it, but because they needed it!

¹⁴Again, space does not permit my telling this story in detail, but you may want to do so. Note: If you have children in the audience who know the children’s song about Zaccheus, you may want to refer to the song.

¹⁵This part of the lesson can be expanded.

CONCLUSION

“Grace is what you need, but don’t deserve.”¹⁶ Never forget it! If you could live ten thousand years, you could never deserve salvation. If you were to do good deeds every second of every day of those ten thousand years, you could never deserve a moment in heaven. You can, however, be saved today by the grace of God if you will

¹⁶Review the lesson as needed at this time.

¹⁷Unfaithful Christians should also be encouraged to return to the Lord.

trust in Jesus and submit your will to His—not because you deserve it but because you need it. If you have not been baptized, why not obey the Lord today?¹⁷ ❖

NOTES FOR THE PREACHER

I made a large strip of paper with the words “WHAT YOU NEED, BUT DON’T DESERVE.” I hold it up from time to time during this lesson. When appropriate, I ask my listeners to repeat the words aloud.

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