

The Gospel of God's Grace
Acts 20:17-35
April 17, 2016

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

In verse 24 of today's Epistle reading, Paul speaks about the ministry which was given to him by Jesus: *I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God.* (Ac 20:24 ESV).

The word Gospel means "good news," and grace is undeserved favor. Paul was commissioned to preach a two-fold message: 1) God has provided salvation for his sinful people; 2) God's salvation comes without any worthiness on the part of his people.

Paul's message was all about God's grace. God's grace is so foreign to our sinful nature that to truly appreciate his grace we must understand and accept certain facts. We must understand and accept the fact that we need grace and the reason why we need grace.

The subject of sin is not a very popular topic. People don't like being faced with the fact that we are all sinners. However, accepting one's sinfulness is necessary for salvation.

If we look into Scripture, we find some facts about sin that help people see the universality of sin.

Romans 3:23: *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* There are no perfect people. Sin is not only something we do, it's also a defect we are born with. Even a baby in its mother's womb is sinful. King David went so far as to say he was sinful at the moment of his conception (Ps 51:5).

James 2:10: *Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.* It is impossible to be just a little sinful. God judges on a pass/fail basis. One sin is as bad as all sin.

Romans 6:23: *The wages of sin is death.*

Isaiah 59:2: *Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.*

Isaiah 64:6: *We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.*

Genesis 3:19: *By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

What do these verses mean to us? They mean several things. They tell us that we must all plead guilty. No humans can escape the stain of sin. Only Jesus lived on this earth without sinning and he did that so he might pay the price of our sin.

That leads us to an understanding that no one will go to heaven because they were good enough. You have probably heard someone say about another person who has died, "He or she must have gone to heaven because they were so good." That's not possible. Not one of us can lead a life worthy of eternal life with God. Even the best one of us is too sinful to stand in God's presence simply on our own merit.

Furthermore, our sins have alienated us from God. God didn't walk away from Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve walked away from God. When they chose to sin, they broke their relationship with God.

Without a positive relationship with God, we suffer spiritual death. Spiritual death is eternal separation from God. When we leave this world, there are only two options for eternity. No relationship with God means we are unfit for heaven. If we are unfit for heaven, we must spend eternity in hell.

Since we are sinners and we have no capacity for good in our sinful nature, we are helpless to remove the guilt and punishment of our sin. There are no penances that can make peace between a sinner and a righteous God.

We can't run away from our guilt. We can't work away our guilt. We can't do enough good deeds or give enough money in exchange for what we are and what we have done. No matter how good you might think you are, you're not good enough. We are all sinners and we are all in need of salvation from outside of ourselves. That salvation from outside of ourselves is what God's grace is all about.

We have looked at what Scripture has to say about our sin, now let's look at what the Bible says about God's grace and love.

John 3:16-17: God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

1 John 4:9: In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

God loves people so much that he sacrificed the physical life of his own Son so that we might live with him. We know this, but too often we become immune to the impact of this fact. Without the death of Jesus on the cross, we would have nothing to save us from eternal torment. Nothing!

Let that sink into your brain for a moment. Try to picture what eternal suffering would be like. Just like we can't fully understand what eternal happiness would be like, we can't fully understand what eternal suffering would be like – but God can. That's why his love for us drove him to offer Jesus for us.

You heard 1 John 4:9, now listen to 1 John 4:10: *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins* (1 Jn 4:10 NIV).

The dictionary defines "atoning" as making amends for wrongdoing. Jesus is our atoning sacrifice because God considers his innocent death to be sufficient payment for our sins. The love that God displayed through the death of his own Son is unequalled. It's the amazing thing that sets Christianity apart from all other religions.

But why would God do such a thing? God set the price for sin. God's price for sin is the shedding of innocent blood. In the Old Testament, a sin sacrifice had to be a young lamb without any defect or blemish. In the New Testament, that young, perfect lamb was Jesus. John the Baptist said these words when Jesus approached: *Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!* (Jn 1:29 ESV).

No sinful human could ever pay God's price for sin. God's tremendous love would not tolerate all of his creation being separated from him forever. Therefore, as the supreme act of grace, God, himself, paid the price of sin. God provided the salvation we could never attain.

All of this Good News brings us to ask the question that the rich young man asked

Jesus: *What good thing must I do to get eternal life?* (Mt 19:16 ESV). That reminds me of the story about a young man who went to church for the first time. He paid careful attention to the hymns, the Scripture readings, and the sermon. He felt the Holy Spirit tugging at his heart, so when the service was over, he asked the pastor, “What can I do to be saved?” The pastor answered, “Son, there’s nothing you can do to be saved.” As the man started to turn toward the door, the pastor said, “There’s nothing you can do to be saved because Jesus has already done it.”

To remove all thoughts of earning salvation, Paul told the Ephesian Christians: *It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast* (Eph 2:8-9 ESV).

The salvation that Jesus purchased for us is available to everyone who believes in the one true God. For those who believe and trust in the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, salvation is a free gift. Not only is your salvation a free gift, but so is the faith it takes to believe. God couldn’t make it any easier for you.

Just in case you didn’t understand what I just said, listen to Paul explain it: *If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved* (Ro 10:9-10 ESV).

That is the Gospel of God’s grace in action.