

Introduction...Ripples in the pool

There is something mysteriously peaceful that occurs in us when we stand on the bank of a pond or lake to admire the calm surface of the water. The mystery comes because we don't know what is beneath the surface but the peacefulness is visible. When the waters are undisturbed it almost looks like a mirror reflecting the sky above. With just a little bit of imagination looking into those still waters is almost like looking through some mystical portal into another world that looks much like our own but eerily upside-down.

But in one second all of that peace, calm, and imagination can be erased; all you need is to throw a stone into the water and the mystery will vanish. The glassy surface is broken up and disrupted by the impact of that one small stone. At the point of impact, you will see an initial splash and then concentric circles of waves will begin to expand out from that point. Within seconds those waves will have successfully distorted the entire surface of the water and along with it the peace and calm of the scene.

When God created the heavens and the earth, the water and the dry land, the plants, animals and humanity as well; the creation was in a state of perfect peace. And all that God had made reflected His glory in the way it was intended. But into that world of peace and beauty came an enemy bent on sabotage. He deceived our first parents, leading them into open rebellion and sin against God. **Their act of disobedience was the stone that was cast into the pool and the reverberation of Adam and Eve's rebellion has spread out to cover all of us right down to this very day.**

The issue at stake in the Garden was not some arbitrary fruit; the issue at stake was the right to determine what is good and evil. The essence of sin is a longing for autonomy (self-rule) which is to "choose oneself as the source of determining what is right and wrong, rather than relying on God's Word for direction."¹

Up to that point it was God who declared something good and it was God who declared something evil. But Satan offered Eve the opportunity to decide **for herself** what was good and what was evil. Ultimately sin is putting oneself in the position of God.

And we see this same thing on full display in our world today. We live in a culture where the foundation of our thinking is that we determine what is right and good for ourselves independent of any outside force or person. And we don't just see this at work out in the culture, we see this in the church as well.

Every time we say, I know what the Bible says, **but**. Every time we determine in our minds that we know better than God how something should be. This is the foundation of sin, to grasp at the seat of power which only God can sit upon. We see it where "we prefer our own wisdom to God's wisdom, our own desires to God's will, and our own reputation to God's honor."²

Transition...

But the million-dollar question is, "What is God going to do about the disturbance that has entered His peaceful creation?" Over the past several weeks we have been learning about the nature of God. We learned that He is eternal, infinite, self-existent, unchanging, all-knowing, all-powerful and

¹ Bartholomew and Coheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2004) pp. 42-3.

² Tim Keller *Counterfeit Gods* Pg. 154

unbound by time, space or any other constraint. But how will this awesome God respond to rebellion? In Exodus 34, God has given us a clue that helps us answer this question.

Exodus 34:6 The Lord passed before him (Moses) and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...

This morning I want us to look at the first two attributes that God mentions as He declares Himself openly for the first time to Moses. He tells us in these verses that ***He is a merciful and gracious God who forgives iniquity and transgression and sin.*** I want us to spend our time this morning seeking to understand more of what it means that our God is full of mercy and grace.

Sermon Focus...

Our journey this morning is going to start with a man named Abram. God wants to show us His grace and mercy, not by defining the terms, but by revealing that He has a plan to save sinful people from the judgment they deserve. This plan begins in **Genesis 12** when God comes to Abram and promises that through him all the nations of the world will be blessed.

Look with me at Genesis 12:1-3. Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

This passage marks the beginning of God's work to save His people from their sin and it begins with this one man. **But why did God choose this man?** Was there something awesome in Abram that made God want to choose him? Did God look into the future and see that Abram was going to become this amazing man and decide to choose him? Did God just roll the dice and hope for the best? Why did God choose Abram?

I. God's chose Abram as a display of His sovereign Grace.

Some would say that Grace is a NT concept and that the OT paints a much different picture of God. That argument sounds good and is somewhat effective given that you haven't read your Bible. But just a little digging into the text of Scripture here will reveal that God's election of Abraham was based upon His sovereign grace.

According to **Gen 11:31**, Abram lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the city of Haran. This is ancient Mesopotamia, a land that History shows us to have been inhabited by people who worshipped pagan gods.

In Abram's day this was a thriving commercial city where the inhabitants worshipped the moon-god, Sin. In fact, Haran was the chief city and center of worship for this god.³

This was a mountainous region and it was thought by the people of that day that in the mountains was the abode of the gods. This helps us to understand what was going on in Babel as we see the nations wanting to build a mountain-like tower in order to establish their own deity.

³³ WyCliffe Bible Commentary pg. 16

This land of Ur was the country of Abram. Its people were his kindred. Their way of life was his. **Joshua 24:2** tells us that Abraham along with his father and brother served other gods. IOW, Abram was a pagan worshipper of false gods. He had no righteousness to speak of, yet into this situation God extends his gracious call.

(**Illus.** The Forrest: Pluralism vs. the Gospel...**Let me illustrate the point this way.**

Pluralism believes that all roads lead to God. A pluralist might say that the world of religion is like a vast mountain. The one true god sits at the top of the mountain while the people of the world are huddled up in various places around the bottom of the mountain.

Each group has a different name for the god at the top and a different understanding of how to get to him. Each group teaches that the way to get through to the top depends on the unique path in front of them; but the pluralist insists that all of the different groups of people are working their way toward the one god who sits at the top.

Now this sounds reasonable and in many ways it is an accurate representation of how the religions of the world view their journey to god. Each world religion places the responsibility upon man to raise himself up out of the brokenness of the world. The religions of the world all teach that in order to be at peace with god, man is the one that must do all the striving.

The problem with this idea is that the Bible paints a completely different picture. The Bible enters this illustration by stating that the God at the top of the mountain, rather than sitting and waiting to be discovered, He came down and revealed himself to mankind. But there's more! He didn't tell them a path to follow in order to find peace with Him; in an act of unthinkable grace He gave up His life to bring those people up to the top of the mountain with Him.

And rather than leaving all the peoples of the world to fail in their various attempts to climb the mountain, God sent His people to go into the world to declare the **Good News** of God's grace.

This whole place began when God came and spoke to Abram and made a covenant with him promising that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. Abram was worshipping false gods when God, by His **grace** came and said, "I'm going to bless you, not because you deserve it, but because I have chosen you to be the father of my people."

This same is true for you and I today, by the way. We bring nothing to the table that we can offer to God for salvation. The only thing that we contribute to salvation is our **need to be saved**. But the Bible shows us that our God is a God of mercy and grace who pursues us in order to overcome the separation that stands between us. He knows that we are wretched sinners who deserve nothing but His judgment; and yet, through the work of Christ He loves us, deals with our sin and brings us into His family.

Romans 5:8 God shows his love for us in that **while we were still sinners**, Christ died for us... we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into **this grace**.

But what is **this grace**?

II. The Difference between Common Grace and Saving Grace

As we study the grace of God it is important to make a distinction between what we might call **Common Grace** and what we know as **Saving Grace**. Common grace is seen in the gifts that God

gives to all men such as life, health, strength and even special skills. Nations, communities, families and individuals all benefit from the common grace of God. "God causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike (**Matt 5:45**).” But common grace does not save men from their sin because it does not change the human heart.

Saving Grace, on the other hand, is a perfection of God’s character that is exercised only toward those that *He has chosen to love from before the foundation of the world* (**Eph 1:4**). The elect of God do not in any way deserve this grace but rather they deserve God’s judgment for their sin. And yet, God pours out His saving grace on His people and He does so freely and because He has chosen to do so. God is under no obligation to save any man from sin, but He gives saving grace to whom He wills.

“Divine grace is the sovereign and saving favor of God exercised in the bestowment of blessings upon those who have no merit in them and for which no compensation is demanded from them. Nay, more; it is the favor of God shown to those who not only have no positive deserts of their own, but who are thoroughly ill-deserving and Hell deserving (**AW Pink**).”

God’s grace is God’s favor freely given to those who do not deserve it. It is the unmerited blessing of forgiveness that is received, not by our working, but by our believing. Saving grace does not come to us by works, we don’t earn it through church activities and attendance. It is freely bestowed on all who **believe**.

What is the difference between religion and the gospel of Grace?

When we think about religion we are often thinking about what a man must do to be accepted by God. The religions of the world all teach their own spin on the various ways man thinks he can earn forgiveness from God. Buddhism teaches the 8-fold path, Islam teaches the 5 pillars, Hinduism teaches an endless number of paths that will lead to enlightenment and all of these are supposedly ways that man can achieve peace with God. Then Jesus came along and He didn’t teach another way for man to earn peace with God, He taught that He himself was **the way** to peace with God.

The gospel is not a series of steps that you can follow in order to be saved. The good news is that even though we are **all sinners** who deserve God’s wrath Jesus died in our place taking upon Himself the wrath that we deserved. He didn’t die for you or me because we were worthy of his sacrifice; no one is worthy of His sacrifice. The only thing that we contribute to our salvation is our sin...we have nothing to boast about.

Eph 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

3 Characteristics of Saving grace

1. Grace is eternal: it was planned before the world began

2 Timothy 1:9 (God) who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,

2. Grace is free: it cannot be earned, deserved or purchased (Rom 3:24)

Romans 3:24 (We) are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

3. Grace is sovereign: God exercises it toward those whom He chooses and He is under no obligation to do so.

Exodus 33:19 (God says) I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

Saving Grace is a gift that all 3 persons of the godhead are involved in.

1. God the Father is the gracious One who planned from eternity past to lavish a people with His grace. He is the fountain of all grace.

2. Christ the Son is the channel of Grace. Apart from the work of Christ upon the cross to atone for sinners, the grace of God would never be extended to us, because we would be required to pay the penalty for our sin to satisfy the justice of God.

3. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Grace and He bestows/applies the gift of grace to our hearts in the new birth.

Yahweh is a God of amazing grace. He is also full of mercy.

III. The Mercy of God

“O give thanks to the Lord: for His is good for His mercy endures forever (**Ps 136:1**).”

As we think about the Mercy of God the first question for us to ask is “How does the mercy of God differ from His grace?”

Mercy Defined and Distinguished

God’s mercy and grace are really two sides of the same coin. Mercy is that attribute of God that is seen when God withholds the punishment our sin deserves while Grace is that attribute of God that is seen when God gives to us what we do not deserve. All men everywhere deserve judgment because all men everywhere, “Have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (**Romans 3:23**)” We have earned God’s wrath by our sin, but His mercy is seen when He withholds His wrath from us.

Mercy is God’s readiness to relieve the suffering of His creatures. It is that goodness of God, which is extended toward sinners as a withholding of punishment due for sin.

Mercy Illustrated in the Garden

We see the mercy of God displayed as early as **Genesis 3** and it is directed toward Adam and Eve. God created them male and female. He blessed them and placed them in the Garden and He gave them a command, “You may eat the fruit of every tree in the garden save one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You shall not eat of it *for when you eat of it you will die.*”

Later as the story unfolds we are introduced to a serpent, the devil himself, who comes to deceive and to destroy. Through the serpent’s deception Adam and Eve disobey the command of God and they eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. What you expect to happen next is for God to arrive and carry out the sentence of death, but He does not. Instead, He announces the consequences of their sin and He shows them mercy.

God holds back their sentence of death and instead He substitutes the death of another in order to cover their shame and nakedness (**Gen 3:21**). The first act of Divine mercy that we see in the Bible is that God did not destroy Adam & Eve in the garden when they sinned against the command of God.

Why? Why has God done this? The only explanation is that He is, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (**Exod 34:6**).”

Conclusion...

The mercy of God and the grace of God go hand in hand to display an aspect of God’s character to us. These attributes reveal God to be unique and unparalleled among the other religions of the world. These attributes are also to be seen in those who trust in Christ. We are called to share God’s mercy and grace with others; but unfortunately that isn’t always the case.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-35) a man has come to Jesus asking, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” In the exchange that followed they discussed the OT scriptures, which taught that God’s people were to love God with all their heart...but they were also to love their neighbor. The man replied, “But who exactly is my neighbor?”

Then Jesus told a story...

30 “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.

Jesus’ story featured a man who was travelling a dangerous road when the worst-case scenario unfolds. He is attacked, beaten, stripped naked and robbed, then left for dead on the side of the road. An innocent man has been brutally attacked and the question is, “Who will care enough to help him?” Surely God’s people will be generous! Surely a man of God will step up and help this dying man!

The first man to walk by was a priest, a servant of God who ministered in the temple. Surely this godly man will stop and care for the dying victim. But Jesus tells us that this priest, concerned only for himself, crosses to the other side of the road offering no help to the man in need. The second one to come by is a Levite who also shared in temple ministry but he too offers no help.

Two men have come by and seen the desperate situation and they have both refused to help, refused to love this man, refused to obey **Leviticus 19** and refused to love their neighbor. How much do you have to hate someone to walk by them on the side of the road while they lay dying? How much of a coward do you have to be to avoid helping a dying man who is lying at your feet?

This is more than the lawyer bargained for when he asked his question. Jesus is not just expounding on the law of God and the requirements that are laid on God’s people, Jesus is also challenging the posture of the religious leaders of that day, a posture that this lawyer accepted for himself. This man wants to shrink the scope of responsibility that the law requires. He is looking for the minimum obedience required but Jesus refuses to soften God’s Word. Jesus has turned this conversation into a confrontation and He is now the one asking the questions.

The parable continues...

33 But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’

Along comes an ordinary guy, not an expert in the law, not a religious leader, but a Samaritan and he alone shows compassion to the dying man. God is not concerned with our titles, our degrees, or our status: He is after humble obedience that proceeds from faith. He wants us to show love, mercy and compassion to others because He has shown love mercy and compassion to us.

Loving one's neighbor was not just a theological concept of debate for this man it was a command of God that he was willing to obey even at great risk and at great cost to himself. This Samaritan has done everything he could to be a neighbor to this dying man whom he had never met. He wasn't interested in narrowing the scope of God's commands; he was interested in loving his neighbor.

One final question, "Does this passage teach us what we must do to inherit eternal life?" Perhaps you came in here today with the honest question, "What must I do to be saved?" So does this passage answer that question? Yes! If we were able to love God perfectly (with our heart, soul, mind and strength) and if we were able to love our neighbors perfectly then we would be righteous in God's sight. But the problem is that no man can achieve either of these things on his own. No man by works of the law will be justified in God's sight (**Rom 3:20**).

But Christ is full of mercy and grace and He has fulfilled the law on our behalf. Jesus, full of love and compassion, came to us while we lay dying on the side of the road. He came to bind up our wounds by tearing up his own rich garments. He came to anoint us with wine that cleanses and with oil that soothes. He placed us upon his back and he bore the burden of our sin. Then He paid our ransom price when he willingly endured the cross and died in our place. He has also promised that even though He has gone away He will return and settle our account once and for all.

On our own we could never love God or man perfectly, but in Christ we have been perfectly loved and in response He calls us to share His love with others. This is the gospel message. This is the central truth of the Scriptures and it is true because our God is full of mercy and grace.