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“Grace Upon Grace: It Is Enough”

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Alright, we are starting a new sermon series this morning that we are calling Grace upon Grace. And so we're going to be using some of the stories and writings of the Apostle Paul to guide us as we explore this theme. And so to start us out, I just want to ask, like, what do we mean when we talk about grace? We were at dinner with some friends last night at Corner Brewery, one of my non-church going friends, like, what are you preaching about? But she never asks. And I was like, uh, Grace. She's like, what does that even mean? It's like, you need to kind of go through it a little bit.

I thought, that's a good place to start because there's a lot of things we mean when we talk about that word. So I don't usually spend too much time on definitions or etymology unless it's useful. But I think in this case it would be helpful for us to define because we use the word so many different ways in English. And just to get a little bit crunchy for just a second.

For those of you for whom it's helpful, maybe you're a more visual learner. You might want to look at the notes that I've given you there. So most of the New Testament was written in Greek. The word we translate is grace, in Greek is *Keras*, and it just means free gift. So grace is a free gift. And you might recognize that from that word, we get some other words like *charism*, *charisma* and *charismatic* and so on. And so with *charism*, it's just a specific free gift from God for the benefit of the community, right? So what we call the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we did a sermon series on some of those back in April and May, but things like prophecy and teaching and leadership and so on, those are called *charisms*.

So *charismatics* then are people who exercise these free gifts of the spirit. That's that little root word that we translate as grace is just a free gift. And the concept of grace in the New Testament is actually pulling from a couple of different Hebrew words or ideas. And you'll have to forgive my pronunciation because I don't do gutturals very well. But those two are *chen* and *chesed*. *Chen* is something like unearned goodwill or favor, unearned approval. And *chesed* means something close to faithful, loving kindness. Only it's a little bit bigger than that.

It's like faithful, loving kindness that's cultivated for the sake of repairing the world. And so the New Testament concept of grace is combining these two Hebrew ideas, right? Mixing this absolute unearned approval of *chen*, with the faithful, loving kindness and the healing of the world that *chesed*, it's a free gift of God's approval of us and God's love for us, for all of creation. And it's a love that causes God to be generous to us, for our healing and for our benefit, you might say, for our salvation to make us whole, right? So like grace is where it's at, right? That's the foundation of Christianity. And the man who first spoke extensively about God's grace for humans was the apostle, Paul. And we know his name wasn't originally Paul, it was Saul. And some of you know about Saul, but some of us here may not. And so what I would like to do is tell you part of his story this morning.

So a long time ago, in a land far, far away. About the time when Jesus was a teenager, there was another Jewish boy who was being born in a port city on the Mediterranean coast in the Roman Empire, and that city was called Tarsus. And it's in what today is the country of Turkey. Really gorgeous coastline down there. And this boy's parents called him Saul. And it's likely that he came from a family of tentmakers, since that was his trade as he became an adult. And Saul was a devout child, and as he

matured, he found himself drawn into a more rigorous stream of his faith. And so he traveled to Jerusalem, and he studied with a really well-known teacher named Gamaliel the Elder, who was the grandson of the great sage Hillel. And so Saul came to acquire some top credentials in rabbinical education, although he's never referred to as a rabbi, and I don't think he was officially one that we know of. But he was very well educated, and he grew increasingly zealous as he grew into adulthood.

And so at the same time that he was coming of age, there was a sect of Judaism that was just emerging called "The Way." And The Way was centered around the teachings of a rabbi called Jesus. And so many people were starting to follow this way, and they were finding life through it. And that includes some of the great rabbinic teachers and some of the top Jewish Pharisees and leaders. But the sect was viewed by skepticism by some others, including by Saul.

And some of them, like Saul, became radicalized in their fear of The Way. And they grew violent toward people who were following it. And I want to be like super-duper cautious here and how I describe what was happening, because I don't want it to be heard here as like Saul, the Jewish man versus the early Christians or the early followers, because that's not really what was happening. It was another decade or so before someone was even called a Christian, and even then, it wasn't a separate religion, right?

This is an internal tension that was happening, and it's not a great parallel, but you might think of it like today with Christianity in the United States, right? We might have a small percentage of people who are like super fundies or nationalists who might be enticed to do violence to other Christians. But the majority landscape of Christianity is not that, right? And the same with Judaism in Saul's time.

It's not a great parallel because it's a little more complicated of a situation. But just know Saul is not representative of all Judaism here, it's just that his is the story of being one of the super radicalized people. Does that make sense? Because that's the interesting, you know, his story is interesting.

When we first meet him in the book of acts chapter seven, he's overseeing the stoning of a man who was really well respected in the community and was a follower of Jesus, whose name was Stephen. And his only crime was following The Way. And we're told that at this time Saul was a young man. And then we're told this in Acts 8. It says "That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen, and they made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women. He committed them to prison."

So after terrorizing the believers and the followers of this way in the city, he decided he was going to go after the people who had fled to try and get away. Right? These are the people who had moved their families to cities like Antioch and Damascus to escape this persecution. And so Saul decided first to go to Damascus, and he obtained some letters that would let him go and extract any Jews who were worshiping in the synagogues, who were also part of The Way. And so he was out to round up any and all followers of Jesus up in Damascus. This is in Acts 9, it says, "Now as he was going along and he was approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him, and he fell to the ground. And he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' And he asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up. Enter the city and you will be told what you are to do.' And the men who were traveling with him, they stood speechless

because they heard the voice, but they saw no one. And Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. And so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank."

And so he had this powerful mystical encounter that left him blinded and wondering what to make of what had just happened to him. And then while he wasn't able to see, he's gone into the city. There's another man in that same city. And that man's name is Ananias. He's over here praying. And as Ananias prayed, God told him about Saul. He told him where Saul was staying. And God asked Ananias to go and to visit Saul. But he was scared because this guy had a reputation and he had heard about this guy, and he'd heard about the terror that he had brought on so many people, probably even people Ananias knew personally. He'd probably been helping welcome some of these people into the city as well. And God told Ananias, don't be afraid. And so he went, and he visited Saul, and he found him unable to see. And so he laid hands on him, and he prayed for him. And it says that the scales fell from Saul's eyes. And we're told that his sight was immediately restored, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. And he emerged a changed man. And so really, Saul had two divine encounters, right? He had one on the road with the voice. And then he had the second one through his meeting with Ananias, who confirmed that God was indeed at work here, that this wasn't just like a little collective psychosis event that he'd experienced. The scales fell from his eyes, both literally and metaphorically. This experience just cracks Saul open like an egg. And you'd have this hard outer shell that was just, like, now totally shattered. It's just playing in an absolute mess all over the kitchen counter. Right. A lot of what he thought he had understood in his life, like what he thought was for sure understood, is now just in shambles.

Okay, so this is a guy, he was like an Uber fundamentalist, right? He had a mystical experience with God. He came to realize that his quest for religious purity, right? His self-righteous actions of trying to persecute people who disagreed with him, that that quest had actually hurt the God that he'd been trying to serve. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Now, I've worked with pastors over the years who have come to see their own life's work as profoundly damaging to people in certain areas of the ministry for different reasons, sometimes because they excluded women. Sometimes it was LGBTQ people. And by the time they come to me or to Ken, they are scared and they're sad and they're humbled and they've come to know, and I include myself in this because I know I have changed over the twenty-five years, right? We come to know God's grace for us and our human mistakes. And then I think that makes them better pastors, right? Because now there's humility in realizing that like false certainty and judgments can do a lot of damage to people. And this is how I see Saul. Right, he's one of these humbled leaders, only like he was actually killing people. Right? And dude, this is like a, this is up a level. I've lost some friends who have been killed for their faith and so Saul is more like the people who killed them. And he's more like the man who shot and killed my friend Bashir in Srinagar in 2006, or the man who shot and killed my friend Abdiwali near Garissa, Kenya in 2013. I spent Christmas Day, 2007 with Abdiwali all of his family and their kids in their homes. About three weeks ago, thirty-one Nigerian Christians were killed just because they're Christian.

I was thinking about Saul and he's really more like the men who are overseeing things like that than the pastors reaching out to us, right? He was profoundly dangerous and violent on a level that's really hard for us to relate to, because we don't have that level of religious violence in our country. Thank God, and may it not be right. But his past deeply affected them and how he approached things pastorally. And

you could just see his regret lingering through all of his writings. It really impacted his entire life. And so harming or harming others, we know it does violence to ourselves too. Right. And that needs tending and healing and that's what's going on with us. And because of this vision of Jesus that Saul had, of Jesus letting Saul know that his actions were actually hurting the heart of God. He completely changed his ways. And eventually he changed his name to Paul to reflect that transition, that transformation.

So then as soon as he was able to, he made his way back to Jerusalem because he wanted to go and he wanted to meet with the leaders of the Jesus movement to apologize to them and to try to make things right and to join them. But understandably, they didn't want to have anything to do with him. They thought it was a trap. He had been so dangerous and so conniving that they were like, it would be just like this guy to try and work his way into the inner circle so that he could do damage. And so they said no.

But there was a man called Barnabas. Barnabas is probably my favorite character in the Bible, aside from Jesus for many reasons. But Barnabas went to Saul and he made space for him to tell his story. And it just took time to listen to what was going on with him. And he believed him. And he was really open hearted, and he withheld judgment. And so he took him to the other leaders, and he advocated for Saul. And so Barnabas was the reason that Saul was eventually accepted by the leadership as being sincere. And then after that meeting that he had with the leaders, Saul went away for a few years to go to pray and to study over in Arabia and Syria. I kind of call this as deconstruction era, right? He had to kind of figure out like how to, how to like, sort of rethink about his faith in a way that was healthier. There's no indication that he planned to become a leader in the early Jesus movement. It seems like he just went off to live a quieter life out of the limelight. He's like, you know, a dog with a tail between his legs.

And it's only after many years that his old friend and advocate, Barnabas, came to fetch him. And Barnabas had kept Paul in the back of his mind. He remembered him, and he went. And he brought him to Antioch to disciple him. He was like, come see what God's doing. We'll talk more about that in about three weeks.

But I want us to understand about grace today, is that the man who first started putting this concept together theologically, deeply understood what it meant to receive the free, unearned favor and love of God. Alright, that he was a man who had been violent and self-righteous and overly zealous, who introduced so much terror into a community, and yet he was still considered a beloved son by God. Maybe a wayward son, but always worthy of love and belonging. And if you treat your kids and your grandkids and your nieces and nephews right, like no matter what kind of foolishness they get up to in this life, you're always going to love them, right? And that's a Dolly Parton song, "I will always love you." You will always long for a good relationship with those that you love.

The theologian C Baxter Kruger, who says Grace invites us into the assurance that we are always God's beloved children. We're always welcome at the table. With God's people as well. We are always welcome in their homes or welcome in God's fellowship. We're welcome in the relationship of the Trinity. We are always welcomed to the spiritual inheritance that they promised to all humankind. He says that shame is the lie that replaces this true identity. Shame is the lie that replaces this true identity, and shame tells us we're not worthy of God's love and acceptance because of our own pain, or because of our own limitations. There's something about us, or something we've done or not done. But

our deepest truth is that grace is always available to us. The free gift of God's love and presence and power in our lives. No matter how many times we mess up, no matter how many times we let ourselves or let other people down.

I know Doctor Brené Brown has been everywhere in the last decade, right? You've probably heard at least some of what she said about things like shame and resilience, but I think it's worth repeating because it's so core to our well-being, right, her research. Research shows that the biggest thing that keeps people from moving forward in life and having meaningful connections with other people is shame. And shame is that feeling that we don't belong or we're not lovable because there's something inherently wrong with who we are, or because that we've acted in ways that make us feel shame, not guilt. Right? She always draws a little distinction there. Like guilt is actually usually a healthy response to doing something that hurts someone else, but shame is different. Guilt says, I did something bad. Shame says I am bad, right? And saying I am a bad person, we know was different than saying I am behaving badly. I know you parents teach your kids this all the time. You're not a bad kid who's making bad choices, right? But even when we know the difference between these things, it is hard to be free from shame stories because they come at us from all sides of our culture just seeping in, right? All of those not enough stories. You're not successful enough, you're not buff enough, you're not thin enough, you're not friendly enough. You don't have enough willpower to get clean. You don't have enough money or social skills or whatever it is, those shame voices in our heads.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that there's a story with a deeper truth than these not enough stories that we tell ourselves. And the deeper truth is that God's grace covers this multitude of seeming limitations. It meets us in our darkest moments and our feelings of weakness and our feelings of inadequacy. And it reminds us of who we are and of whose we are, and that we are loved by God, our creator, and we are accepted. And this creator wants to meet us in our hardest moments with kindness, with generosity. And Paul's life changed completely when he received God's grace, because God's generosity doesn't leave us immobilized, right?

God's grace creates movement and it creates freedom in our lives. It gives us the freedom to become different and to choose differently, and to repair what's been damaged, even when that takes a really long time. It gives us the freedom to participate in God's healing of the world. And as the late, great Dolly Parton, Our Lady of the holler, once said, if you don't like the road you're walking, start paving another one. Grace frees us from shame, and it helps us to stand back up and to walk a different path. Speaking of Dolly Parton, I was like, I got a stick her in this. I've already written the sermon. I was like, I gotta put her in a sermon on grace, right? If you want an example of a person who personifies grace, there we have it. That's why everybody loved her. I look at her and I think of that. That is a Christian woman right there. Right. She personified and reflected the grace of God that everybody she met, they knew that she didn't judge them because of anything about their background. She had this quiet confidence in her own identity and her belovedness by God. She was like, I know who I am, and she knew she had made mistakes, but she still knew very deep down who she was made to be. Right behind the scenes, she just meted out gifts to help repair the world and to empower other people to do that.

So I didn't even know this because I barely on social media, but Rachel saw on Facebook that our Archbishop, Bishop Yvette Flunder, had posted right after Dolly died, that she actually gave TFAM a really significant donation some years back, which I didn't know. Right. Who would know? She's just like quietly doing this stuff, doling out her money. And I thought that was really cool. I also think it's

interesting that after Dolly died, like her music awards were more like a footnote, even though like, wow, what an accomplished artist. Eleven Grammys, ten CMAs, a National Medal of Arts and so on. But what people talked about was her kindness and her character and her joy and her generosity and her forgiveness and her deep care for the working-class people and for people who live in poverty, and her ability to let people just be themselves around her.

So find out who you are and do it on purpose, right? That is grace personified. Who am I made to be? And she's like, I just knew what I was supposed to do. I knew that God loved me, and I knew that I was supposed to go and be a singer and do this. So I know our belovedness in God and like, know who you are and go out and do it on purpose.

Grace is the mercy of discovering that our life is way bigger than the worst thing we've done, and it's way larger than the worst thing that's happened to us. Amen. Right. Our failures and our traumas are real, and they can feel terrible, but they are not the final word in our life. They do not get to write the ending to our stories. There is always more story left to tell, because the grace of God is boundless and unceasing.

And Saul turned Paul, he knows what it's like to look backwards at a complicated life. Right. He was puritanical and he was wrong. And he caused a lot of harm to a lot of people. And he was absolutely certain about things that he came to see differently. And yet when he looked back at his life, he wrote almost with astonishment in first Corinthians, "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain." For Paul, as for all of us, grace meant that there could be a tomorrow that his younger self couldn't have imagined. And God pours grace into us imperfect vessels. And he somehow says, here, take this, carry this to the world instead. Amen. *Amen*.

All right. We need to take a minute here just for some silence or guided meditation. But let's just take about a minute of silence. People make noise. Let's just make space for God to, um, just remind us of our belovedness. And if there's something that you're carrying that you're wanting to just take time to present before God, this is a great time to do that as well. So come Holy Spirit in this space.

Lord, we thank you that there's absolutely nothing that can separate us from your love. In that silence I was reminded of that passage that Paul wrote in Romans about how nothing, absolutely nothing can keep us from God; neither height or death or anything else in all of creation. Nothing we've done, nothing about who we are. We don't have to get to a certain place in our life for you to be ready to use us. Lord, we just thank you that you meet us in the immediacy of our everyday lives right where we're at. And God, I ask that you would just help us to experience that grace and that free love and that presence that you feel your love toward us, just as we go through our week this week. And I ask that you would open our hearts as you're teaching us about grace over these next few weeks. In Your name we pray, Amen. *Amen*.