

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Message		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Ephesians 2:1-13		Gary L. W. Johnson
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THE GRACE AND MERCY OF GOD

In Ephesians 2:8-9, we read familiar words: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” The “you” addressed in these verses were once “dead” in “trespasses and sins” and destined for God’s judgment (“children of wrath”) (2:1-3). But now, we are told, they have been saved by grace as a sheer gift from God, apart from any works of their own. The whole scenario is recreated in Titus 3:3-7:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Similarly, 2 Timothy 1:9 stresses that God “saved us . . . not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace.” In Ephesians and the Pastorals, the “works” repeatedly rejected as playing a role in salvation are good “works” in general, deeds done “in righteousness,” as Titus 3 puts it. And those “saved” or “justified” by divine grace are sinners, plain and simple, slaves of their sins and otherwise destined for divine judgment; they are not Gentiles inquiring about entrance requirements to a desired community. G. Campbell-Morgan, in a book of a generation ago, said that men’s need was threefold: He is distanced from God by sin, he is ignorant of God through sin, and he is unlike God in sin. The glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the God-man, and His atoning mediatorial work, is that God finds Himself in this person and is with men, for He is man, and man finds himself in this person and is with God for He is God. Thus, he who was distanced from God by sin is restored to God by the gift of righteousness. He who was ignorant of God through sin comes to the knowledge of God through Christ. And he who was unlike God in sin shall come to be like Him in Christ.¹

- I. **THEIR PAST RELATION TO GOD (vv. 11-12).** Outward privileges, such as those enjoyed by Israel, do not exempt men from the wrath of God. However, the Jews did occupy a unique position before God, one which Gentiles did not. Therefore, Paul declares, **remember** (Gk. *mnēmoneuete* – imperative. The word implies not only the mental process of recalling, but the attitude of repentance and gratitude in the process.) *That you gentiles in the flesh, were considered in the following way:*
 - A. **As viewed by the Jews** – the *circumcision*, outwardly, the physical emblem, you Gentiles were called *akrobestia* (lit. “uncircumcision,” a term of intense derision and contempt among the Jews – especially since they proudly called themselves the “circumcision”). The Jews referred to the Gentiles as *haggóyim*. “The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that he had made . . . It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in

her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of the Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death.”²

B. *As it actually was* – What other people think is one thing; how things really are, that’s something else. The Jews despised the Gentiles and rightly saw the Gentiles’ condition before God. But the Jew completely failed to see his own! (comp. Romans 2.) Paul is quick to point out to the Gentile Christians their past. *At that time*, before Grace found you (Paul uses *five* predicates to describe their condition):

1. You were *without Christ* – this is **what** they were;
2. You were *aliens from the commonwealth of Israel*. The word translated “alien” is *apëllotriō menoī*, a strong verb used again in Ephesians 4:18 and Colossians 1:12. It expresses generally the idea of being a complete stranger as over against someone who was at home or comfortable in the presence of another person. Gentiles were not part of the theocracy established by God with Israel (cf. Amos 3:2). This attitude was manifested by Jesus in Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 10:5-6. This is **where** they were;
3. You were *strangers from the covenants of the promise*. The word “strangers,” *xenoi*, expresses the idea of one who is not a member of a certain state or class, as having no share, strictly an outsider or foreigner. The covenant referred to is the Abrahamic, it is **the covenant** in Scripture (cf. Genesis 13:15; 15:18; 17:18; comp. with Galatians 3:17-19). This is **who** they were;
4. You were *without hope* – Hope is built upon promise, and Gentiles did not have any to rest upon. They were “hopeless,” no hope of any kind. God was truly the “silent God” as far as Gentiles were concerned. This is **how** they were;
5. You were *without God* (Gk. *atheoi*, from which we derive the word “atheists”) in the original sense of the word, being without God, and also in the sense of exhibiting hostility to the true God because they refused to worship Him (cf. Romans 1:19-32). This is **why** they were the way they were.

II. **THEIR RELATIONSHIP THROUGH CHRIST (v. 13)**. What could the Apostle possibly say after that stunning speech! The world has summed up the situation, and said, “let us eat, drink and be merry . . . for tomorrow we die,” or some version thereof. Paul spoke truth. *But now* (Gk. *nuni de*, a very strong contrast) “at *that time* you were . . . *but now* you are this!” The late R. C. Sproul, in his own unique way, commented: “I have always said that the first word in verse 4 is my favourite word in all the Bible. It is the word, *But*. As grim as this picture is of man’s fallenness, Paul hastens to add: **But . . . God, who is rich in mercy**. God, out of the treasury of his grace, **made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved**. If you want to understand Reformed theology, read that verse a thousand times. It is the thematic passage of the gospel. The grace that brings us life comes to us at the very time we are dead in sin and trespasses. It is the act of God. Think of it in these terms. If you are a Christian, ask yourself: Why are you a Christian? Is it because you are better than others? Because you were more intelligent? If that is the reason, then certainly you have something of which to boast. But the New Testament teaches that you have nothing of which to boast. You were a debtor who couldn’t pay your debt and while you were dead in your sin and in your trespasses, it was God who quickened you from spiritual death. You could no more have done that yourself than Lazarus could have raised himself from the tomb. It is by grace you are saved. Grace is defined simply as *unmerited favour* or *undeserved benefit*. Christians should never look at non-Christians with a spirit of contempt. Their attitude must reflect the classic saying, *There, but for the grace of God, go I*. They have nothing of which to boast. They are

redeemed not because of merit or good works, but by grace and by *grace alone*. That is the essence of Reformed theology. I believe it to be the essence of Pauline theology: we are redeemed by grace.”³

- A. **The New Situation – IN CHRIST . . . YOU WHO WERE ONCE FAR AWAY** (Gk. *makraan*, stresses distance and separation), but not anymore!! Why?
- B. **The Means – THE BLOOD OF CHRIST** – comp. 1:7. There is no relationship with God except through Jesus Christ and His shed blood. “Outside Christ,” declared Calvin, “there are only idols.”⁴ No religion, no works, in short, “no nothing” can change the situation of v. 12 but the Gospel of Christ crucified. Is it any wonder the apostles demanded this? (cf. Acts 4:12; 2 Timothy 2:5).
- C. **The effect – BROUGHT NEAR** (Gk. *egenēthete eggus*, refers directly to the privileges denied them in v. 12. This parallels Paul’s remarks in Romans 11:24; Gentiles are heirs together *with* Israel to the promises made to Abraham!

III. GRACE AND MERCY. How are these terms different?

1. **Nuance and Overlap.** W. G. T. Shedd (1820-1894), the much-esteemed nineteenth-century American Presbyterian, helps us to distinguish between mercy and grace. While both originate in the will of the Father and are extended to us in Christ, grace “differs from mercy, in that it has reference to sinful man as *guilty*, while mercy has respect to sinful man as *miserable*. Whereas grace refers to the condemnation of sin, mercy refers to the wretchedness of sin. Yet we often find mercy and grace used almost interchangeably, as in Ephesians 2:4. Mercy is associated in the Old Testament with the forgiveness of sin (Ps. 51:1; Dan. 9:9) and restoration to a right relationship to God (Jer. 3:12; 31:9; 36:7; Dan. 9:3, 9, 17; Hos. 1:6-7; 2:1, 19, 23). Often we are told that God is “merciful and gracious,” the two being closely related. Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) calls the revelation of God’s mercy in Exodus 34:6-7 “the main article in the Old Testament creed” and “the sweetest sermon preached.” It is, “he continues, “the highest subject . . . the richest text, and the most renowned and signal description of the nature of God.” His mercy is also often connected with His *hesed*, His “steadfast love” (Neh. 9:17; Pss. 25:6; 40:11; 103:4; Jer. 16:5; Hos. 2:19. Grace (*charis*) and mercy (*eleos*) often appear together in New Testament salutations (eg., “Grace, mercy, and peace”) (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4; Heb. 4:16; 2 John 3). Mercy, as well as grace, can be used as a summary of the whole gospel message. Mercy flows from God’s covenant promises to Abraham and is secured in Christ. In reality the terms are used interchangeably, *mercy* being used as a synonym for *grace* and vice versa, both representing the whole work of redemption. Yet when nuanced, mercy is directed toward our misery, grace toward our guilt. Mercy has in view our suffering, grace our sin. Mercy focuses on the divine *disposition* of sympathy and compassion, grace the divine *deliverance* of God’s people from the cause of their suffering. George Swinnock (1627-1673) summarizes the distinction in this way: “Justice seeks a worthy object, grace is exercised towards an unworthy object, but mercy looks out for a needy, an indigent object.”⁵

CONCLUSION: In Hebrews 4:16, mercy and grace appear to be two separate things. Schreiner observes: “The throne is designated as one of *grace*. Believers draw near to the throne boldly, for they know it is a throne of grace by virtue of Jesus’ work, not a throne of wrath. Hence they confidently and gladly ask God to grant them *mercy*, presumably for sins they have committed. At the same time they petition God for *grace* for the strength and power to face every situation in life. God’s grace is poured out as believers request help when they are overwhelmed.”⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ G. Campbell-Morgan, *The Crises of The Christ* (Revell, 1936), p. 39. This is an outstanding book. It is composed of sermons that Campbell-Morgan preached at Westminster Chapel in London. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones was Morgan's associate and later succeeded him.

² W. Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (St. Andrews Press, 1958), p. 125.

³ R. C. Sproul, *The Purpose of God: An Exposition of Ephesians* (Christian Focus, 2002), p. 49.

⁴ *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, Vol. XI (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 149.

⁵ As cited by Terry L. Johnson, *The Excellence of God RHB*, 2022), p. 9.

⁶ T. R. Schreiner, *Hebrews: Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Lexham, 2020), p. 154. In a footnote, he adds: "Or perhaps *mercy* and *grace* here are simply synonymous."