

## ***“GRACE: Who Needs It?”***

*Genesis 3:1-19 • Romans 1:16-25, 28-2:1*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • June 7, 2020

Just when it seemed like this year couldn't get any worse, the last couple of weeks have proven that they can. It began with the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. I don't want to spend too much time on the details of what happened. You can watch the video for yourself. But it seems obvious that his death could have been prevented. Because Floyd was black and the police officer was white this incident has led many people to believe it was racially motivated. This led to some mass protests and then violent riots that have happened in Minneapolis and in other places around the country. Again, you have probably seen some of the videos of the buildings and vehicles set on fire or the looting taking place in large stores like Target as well as small businesses.

As Christians we can certainly say that it was wrong to murder George Floyd. God said, "You shall not murder." We can also say that the widespread violence is just as wrong. God also said, "You shall not steal." Romans 12:19 says, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" When a woman was caught in adultery and brought to Jesus for his approval to stone her, Jesus responded, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." This doesn't mean people can't protest peacefully. But it does mean that if you are using violence you're not really protesting violence and you are taking into your own hands something that belongs to God.

As I thought about what has happened these past couple of weeks I kept coming back to the beginning of Romans. It seems to me that these verses describe what is going on in our country. "They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." In many ways what we are seeing happen are the natural

consequences of life without God. As a society we have tried to push God to the margins. We shouldn't be surprised when people who are not Christian act like they are not Christian.

This morning we are starting a short 5-message series on grace. If you've been around Reformed theology very long – as Presbyterians we are Reformed – you have probably heard of the 5 points of Calvinism, described with the acronym TULIP. These five concepts have been around since the early 1600s and are a great way to help us understand some of our Reformed theology. But let me just say that they are not actually a summary of Reformed theology but only a small part of it. And I would go so far as to say that this is maybe the most misunderstood part of our Reformed heritage.

So what I want us to focus on is the real meaning of these 5 points – grace. In fact, when you get to the bottom of it, Reformed theology is just a way of explaining God's grace. That's what we are going to talk about. Grace is one of those words that every Christian should understand. It's usually defined as God's unmerited favor. Maybe it's easier to understand it as a gift from God. He gives you something you don't deserve. Learning about grace helps you begin to understand how much God loves you. So here goes.

The acronym TULIP is merely an easy way to remember the five concepts. The T is for "total depravity," which is what we're going to talk about today. The U is for "unconditional election," the L is for "limited atonement," the I is for "irresistible grace," which is everyone's favorite, and the P stands for the "perseverance or preservation of the saints."

Let's talk about Total Depravity. A friend of mine likes to say, "anyone who believes in total depravity can't be all bad." But we're looking at this through the lens of grace. The concept of total depravity answers the question, "who needs grace?"

Romans 3 says, "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: None is righteous, no,

not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." Then verse 23 sums it up: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We find God saying the same thing in a number of places in the Bible. 1 Kings 8:46 says, "there is no one who does not sin." And in 1 John 1:8 we read: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

What is this sin that we are all guilty of? It's what we just learned from our study of the Ten Commandments. Anything that we put ahead of loving God and loving others fully. Romans 14:23 captures this idea: "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." That means even the good things you might do. If it doesn't come from faith, meaning that it is part of loving God and people more than anything, it's sin. All of us are guilty of that. The consequence is a complete separation from God. This is what is described when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and they are sent out of the garden. As Paul says, "the wages of sin is death." Not physical death but the death of our ability to please God.

Total depravity doesn't mean you are as bad as you could be. It's not utter depravity. What it means is that there's no part of your life that is free from sin. A better phrase might be total inability because you and I, apart from Christ, are completely incapable of solving the problem of sin. A good way to understand this is that from the moment you are born you owe God 100% of your thoughts, words, and deeds. Any time you don't love God and others perfectly you are incurring a debt. But since you still owe Him 100% you don't have any extra to pay off the debt. It just keeps growing.

The result, as we see in Romans 1, is the "wrath of God...against all ungodliness and unrighteousness." Maybe you like thinking about God's wrath. I don't. But if you do, chances are you are thinking about someone else experiencing it. Keep in mind that this applies to you, also. When we think of God's wrath we tend to think of things like the Old Testament plagues on the Egyptians. Paul shows us, though, that if

God is really angry with you He simply lets you do what you want. In verse 24 Paul says, "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity. Then in verse 28 he says, "God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done." He then says, "They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness," then he lists all the terrible stuff that was happening. It sounds like the evening news these days.

We have to be very careful when we read this because we think, "yeah, *they* deserve it! I hope *those people* get what's coming to them." But Romans 2:1 shows us that this applies to you and to me as well. Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives we are all capable of terrible things. Who needs grace? You do. I do.

Thankfully God also gives us that grace. I mentioned that Romans 6:23 says, "the wages of sin is death." But that's not the whole verse. It says, "the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." That's what TULIP is all about. The whole reason for understanding total depravity is to see your need for Jesus – to see your actual standing before God and your need for His grace.

So I want to invite you to honestly think about your life. As we come to the Lord's Table together use this as an opportunity to realize your need – and hopefully your desire – to experience the forgiving grace of God who sent his only Son as a sacrifice for your sin. I want to invite you to know why John Newton wrote, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

*Amen.*