

“GRACE: Who Deserves It?”

Deuteronomy 10:12-22 • Ephesians 2:1-13

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • June 14, 2020

I have never been much of an athlete. When I was in elementary school I was thin as a string bean. I couldn't wear the normal jeans and pants. I don't know if it's still this way but in those days boys pants came in various sizes but each size came in three options: normal, slim, and husky. My mother had to buy me the slim sizes. But they were still kind of loose so I had to wear a belt to hold them up – a belt that my father usually had to punch extra holes in so that it would be tight enough.

For several years I played on a softball team sponsored by our church. I'm not sure played is the right word. I was so bad that they put me in center field. It was the farthest position from home plate and it was highly unlikely that any 10-year-old would hit the ball that far out. Perhaps the worst thing, though, was PE class in school. When it was time to play team sports the coach would appoint the two most athletic kids to be team captains and then they would pick their teams. They would each take a turn picking who they wanted on their team. And since they always wanted to have a winning team there were some kids who were always picked last.

This morning we are continuing our series on what are sometimes called the Doctrines of Grace. We're trying to understand what it means to be saved and we're using the acronym TULIP to help us remember them. Last week we talked about the first one, T, which stands for Total Depravity or Total Inability. The question we answered was, who *needs* grace? The answer comes from the book of Romans: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Every one of us is hopeless without God's grace.

Today we're looking at the U of TULIP – Unconditional Election and we want to answer the question, who *deserves* grace? The reason I told you about my scarred childhood of sports is that election has to do with choosing. Specifically it has to do with God choosing. When you first think about it, this seems rather unfair. Shouldn't we all have the same opportunity? The truth is that we *do* all have the same opportunity

and we all used that opportunity to disobey God. As a result we all deserve punishment. As you've heard me say frequently, when it comes to your relationship with God, the last thing you want is what you deserve. None of us deserves grace. The good news is that God does give grace to some. He chooses to have mercy.

As we just heard from Ephesians 2, “you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.” And then verse 4 has one of my favorite statements in the Bible: “But God.” Those are grace words. “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

In the previous chapter, Ephesians 1, Paul says that God chose us before the foundation of the world. He goes on, “In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will to the praise of his glorious grace.” And in Matthew 11, Jesus says, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Friends, those verses alone should bring you to your knees in praise to God. If the idea that the creator of the universe has chosen you personally to be with him forever doesn't humble and amaze you, then I don't know what will.

Who deserves God's grace? Nobody. That's what makes it grace. If you could earn it, it wouldn't be grace. That's why we call it unconditional. God's grace toward you in Jesus is not based on anything you have ever done or will do. Sometimes you will hear people say something like, “Well God already knows who will believe in Him and so that's who He chooses.” That is really the opposite of what the

Bible teaches us. Verse 8 says, “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.”

Sometimes as Christians we forget that our only hope is this gift from God – that we contribute nothing to our own salvation except the sin that makes it necessary. We tend to think in terms of comparison to others. I might think, “well sure I’ve sinned but I’m not nearly as bad as that other person.” One of the parables that Jesus told was about a young man who went to his father and demanded his half of the inheritance. It was basically a way of saying, “I can’t wait for you to die.” The father actually gives him the money and the boy takes off on a spending spree. When the money runs out and he’s starving during a famine he decides to go back and beg his father to give him some work. When he gets home the father, who represents God, throws a party.

The well-known preaching professor Fred Craddock tells of a time he was guest preaching in a church and he preached about the prodigal son. He says that after the service as he was shaking hands a man said, “I don’t care much for that story. It’s morally irresponsible.” Craddock asked him, “Well, what would you have done?” The man replied, “When he came home the boy should have been arrested.” Maybe that’s what the boy deserved. But that’s not what he got. The problem is that this church-going man didn’t really understand grace. What did the prodigal son do to deserve being welcomed back into the family? Nothing. But he was welcomed anyway. Unconditionally. And so are you.

One of the accusations made against this Reformed understanding of the Gospel is that it’s unthinkable that God would drag some people into his Kingdom kicking and screaming while denying entry to others who genuinely want to come but are not part of the elect. And if that were what we meant it would in fact be unthinkable. But Unconditional Election, or what is sometimes called predestination, really means that the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of the elect, convincing them of the truth of the gospel,

making them not only willing to come but pleased to do so. That’s where faith comes in.

What does this look like in your life? Can you know that God has chosen you as one of his own? The answer is yes. Not by saying a certain prayer or filling out a card or attending the right church or giving the right amount of money. Instead it’s an internal work of the Holy Spirit. So how do you know? I think one of the ways you can know is by being curious about Jesus. The fact that you are here in a worship service is a good indication that maybe the Holy Spirit is speaking to you. We’re not serving cookies and punch these days so that’s now why you’re here.

Many of you are here because you already know the grace of God. But there may be some of you that aren’t sure. Sadly, the history of Christianity shows that the Church has not always been welcoming or even kind to those who are unsure, who have questions or doubts. Trust me, though, God is not afraid of your questions. In our Reformed tradition we welcome your questions and doubts and we will walk along side of you to help you find the answers. But it all starts with a willingness to honestly search for truth and explore the person of Jesus. I would even say that the fact that you are here today or watching or listening online is evidence that God is pursuing you.

So I want to invite you, wherever you are in your journey with Jesus, to take the next step in God’s grace and mercy. If you committed your life to Jesus years ago, where are you growing in him now? As verse 10 says, “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Do you need to grow in the area of worship? Are you ready to lead a Bible study? Are you serving in the church and serving people outside the church? Experiencing God’s grace should motivate you to respond in faith.

If you’ve only recently committed or recommitted your life to Christ are you in a discipleship group of some kind, growing in your faith and knowledge? Finally, if you are still not sure about Jesus, are you at least willing to find

out if Jesus really is who he said he is? The amazing thing about God's unconditional election is that it means He loves you just the way you are, no matter what. And so do we.

Amen.