

“GRACE: Who Wants It?”

Deuteronomy 30:1-6 • Philippians 2:1-18

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • July 12, 2020

This morning we are continuing our series on grace and in particular we have been looking at what are called in Reformed Theology the Doctrines of Grace. They are also called the five points of Calvinism and they follow the acronym TULIP, which makes it easier for us to remember. This is important because it helps us understand our relationship to God and more importantly to understand the amazing grace that He gives us.

So as a reminder of where we've been so far, we started with T, which stands for Total Depravity. The question we wanted to answer is who needs grace. Our sinful nature separates all of us from God. Every one of us *needs* grace. The next thing we looked at was the U, which stands for Unconditional Election and we asked, who *deserves* grace. The answer is that none of us deserves God's grace. You can't earn it. God's divine, sovereign choice to save is not based on anything about us. The third point is the L of TULIP, which stands for Limited Atonement, which more accurately should be called Particular Redemption. We wanted to know who *gets* God's grace. Jesus' atoning death on the cross is sufficient to save everyone God chooses.

That brings us to the fourth point, the I, which stands for Irresistible Grace. So today the question we want to answer is, “who *wants* grace?” Before we get to that we have to ask if God's grace is really irresistible or is it possible to resist his grace? When we look at the way things seem to be going in our world it seems clear that lots of people do in fact resist or outright reject God's grace. So how can we claim that it's irresistible?

Here's how. Another name for irresistible grace is “effectual calling.” What both of them mean is that God always accomplishes what He determines to do. Always. Because of sin you and I are totally unable to come to God on our own. Without God intervening we are spiritually dead. So even though the call of the gospel goes out to

many people, it can be and is resisted or ignored. So God chooses to save some anyway through a supernatural work. Jesus accomplished that salvation on the cross but it must still be applied to individuals through faith. That's the work of the Holy Spirit. Notice that the entire Trinity is involved in our salvation. God the Father chooses (that's election), God the Son atones, and God the Holy Spirit makes the atonement effective in you through what's called “regeneration.” That means He makes us alive.

Ephesians 2:4-5 puts it this way: “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.” Only God can give us life and until the Holy Spirit accomplishes this work in us we are unable to respond to the call of the gospel. But once we are made alive spiritually that call becomes irresistible.

A great illustration of this is the raising of Lazarus, found in John 11. Lazarus and his two sisters, Martha and Mary, were very close friends of Jesus. At some point Lazarus became very sick and died. By the time Jesus arrives Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. He wasn't dying at this point, he wasn't even mostly dead. Lazarus was really dead. As you know there was nothing Lazarus could do for himself to change his situation.

Jesus comes to the cemetery and tells them to remove the stone sealing the tomb. Martha, who is ever the practical one, says, “Oh no, you can't do that. It's going to stink really bad by now.” Jesus tells her she must have faith. When they remove the stone Jesus yells, “Lazarus, come out!” The Word of God is powerful. When God speaks things happen. He spoke the entire universe into existence out of nothing and here he speaks life into Lazarus.

Let's pause this story for just a moment. At this point Lazarus is now alive again but he's still

in the tomb. Hold that image in your mind. The main criticism of the concept of Irresistible Grace, and for Reformed Theology in general, is the accusation that people have no free will to choose. God just drags some people into heaven against their will. Now come back to our friend Lazarus. Before they rolled the stone away, before Jesus called out to him, how free was he? What choices did he have available to him? The answer was NONE. He was dead. I think what confuses people is that we “look” alive. Our physical bodies can be alive while our spirit is not. It’s hard to see unregenerate hearts. At the heart of the debate is really whether God is all-powerful or not. Whether humans have the power to stop God’s plans or not.

So let’s come back to Lazarus still laying there in the tomb, but alive again. Here’s where the irresistible part of grace comes in. Once life returns to Lazarus he now is able to make choices. He is now able to hear and answer the call of Jesus. Here’s an interesting question – When Jesus said, “Lazarus, come out,” could Lazarus have shouted back, “NO!”? Obviously the answer is maybe. He theoretically could have chosen not to come out. But he wanted to come out. Because of what the Holy Spirit did, Lazarus wanted to obey Jesus.

It works the same for us. In our reading from Philippians 2, verse 13 says, “God works in you, both to *will* and to work for his good pleasure.” God doesn’t drag us against our will. Instead, when the Holy Spirit makes you alive again he changes our will so that we gladly and willingly run to Jesus. This is the point where we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. When you experience the Holy Spirit calling, you will want to respond because your heart is made alive to the things of God. Who wants grace? Everyone that the Spirit has made alive.

So how do you know if the Holy Spirit is at work in you? How do you know if you are being regenerated? Let’s look at a couple of verses. In our Old Testament reading, Deuteronomy 30, verse 6 says, “the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so

that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” In other words, God will work in your heart so that you will want to keep the commandment to love God with all your heart and soul. If you feel drawn to God it’s a good indication that He is calling you.

First Corinthians 12:3 is even more clear. “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” How do you know? You know because you are interested in the things of God. You know because you decide to follow Christ. And finally, you know because it shows in your life. That brings us back to Philippians 2. God working in your heart looks a lot like verses 14 to 18: “Do all things without grumbling or disputing (how are you doing with that?), that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”

The ultimate evidence of God working in you is a life that points other people to Jesus. When we are grumbling or complaining or arguing, people see us and it reflects poorly on Jesus. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, we are to love sacrificially. That’s how Jesus loved and how He still loves. When you and I love people sacrificially, even (or maybe especially) unbelievers, God can use our example as one of the ways He calls people to himself. Our relationships with each other in the church and our relationships with people outside the faith should be part of the irresistible grace of God in their lives. As he begins the letter to the Philippians, “I thank God for your partnership in the gospel.” God lets us partner with him to make his grace irresistible, which should make us be glad and rejoice.

Amen.