

Christ Presbyterian Church

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James Madsen

Reflections: Grace is More Amazing Than I Imagined

Romans 3:20-25

Can you believe how quickly summer has flown by? I can't remember a summer that has gone by as quickly as this one for me. Or maybe it is because of some of the events in my life. On May 1, this bundle of joy showed up. This is Luke Madsen (*slide shown*). I love the expression on his face. I don't know if that expression is, "What in the world have I gotten myself into?" or "Wow! My mom is so beautiful." It is one of those two or a combination. I wish I had time to tell you the story about when I took Nyquil ten minutes before my wife's water broke. That made the evening more interesting than it needed to be except for that part that I slept through.

We spent a lot of time this summer enjoying watching Luke grow up. I can't believe he is already 4 months old (*slide shown*)! Isn't it amazing how much pride a parent takes in every coo and every smile the baby makes? Or how much Anna and I rejoiced when Luke slept all the way to 4:30 in the morning! I went to a lot of baseball games this summer as well, and I can proudly tell you that my son, Connor who is 10, was the best hitter and pitcher on his baseball team (*slide shown*). In fact, I can humbly tell you that he was probably the best hitter and pitcher in the whole league! I can also proudly tell you that Connor caught the biggest walleye in our family this year. It was 29 inches long, about 9 pounds (*slide shown*). That is a good fish! And I also found out this week that Connor won first place at the State Fair in an art contest, so he is a multitalented kid.

As I talk about my sons, you probably notice a lot of love and pride on my face. It makes me wonder, what does God's face look like when He looks down on us? What do you think? What is your first reaction to that question? When God looks down and sees you, what is the expression on His face? Is He pleased? Is He proud? Is He angry? Is He disappointed? What do you think?

I think it is natural for us to feel like God's feelings toward us are dependent upon our behavior. When I help the little old lady across the street, God is smiling. When I gossip about my neighbor, God is shaking His head. When I show up at church on Sunday, I score points with God. When you come to church on a holiday weekend, you get bonus points. It is natural for us to feel this way, but is that the way it really works? Is that an accurate view of how God sees us? If I were to give you a theological quiz on grace, you guys would do pretty well. I bet you know that we are saved by grace through putting our faith in the work that Jesus Christ did on the cross. I bet you knew that even before we did it in the call to worship. We know that intellectually, but sometimes we struggle to move that idea from our head to our heart. We know that grace saves us, but do we know and apply the truth that the gospel of grace transforms our daily life? The gospel of grace is not just the means of our salvation but it is also what transforms us to allow us to flourish in life.

The sermon today is the last part of a series that we have been calling Reflections (*slide shown*). Some of the staff here at CPC have been sharing what God has been teaching us personally. I have been on a life-long journey of seeking to understand grace and apply it to my life. I call myself a recovering perfectionist because I continually struggle to accept God's grace and revert to feeling that I have to earn His acceptance. A few years ago I met this person who seemed to understand applying grace to our daily lives more than anyone else I had ever met. The more she talked about Jesus and grace, the more I fell in love with her. So I married her! Smartest thing I have ever done! This sermon is some reflections on what my wife and others have taught me about grace these last few years.

The beginning point for understanding grace is accepting that we have a sin problem. I know some of you are chuckling, thinking the first thing my wife taught me is that I have a sin problem. But trust me, I knew that I was the chief of all sinners long before I met her. But a lot of people, a lot of Christians even, struggle with the idea that they actually have a sin problem. This sin problem we have is really on multiple levels. George Barna did a survey that showed that 66 percent of all Evangelical Christians think people are basically good. Well, that is why the hymn goes, *amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a pretty good person like me*. That's not how it goes, is it?

Paul paints a different picture in the Book of Romans, chapter 3.

¹⁰ ...“There is no one righteous, not even one....

He says there is no one who does good. In verse 20 (*slide shown*) he goes on to say,

²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

No one can become right before God by their own effort. It just isn't possible to fulfill the law. We have fuzzy theology. We say we are saved by grace, but in our hearts we live as if our works are the basis of our acceptance before God. Maybe we can say that Christians fall into two ways of thinking: No. 1, “I am basically good, I just need a little grace to cover the gap,” or No. 2, “I am so awful, there is not enough grace to save me.” That might be a little bit over simplified, but I find that I can fall into both of those ways of thinking all in the same day.

I listened to a sermon this summer that was titled, “Cheer Up, You Are Worse Than You Think.” It is a catchy title, isn't it! But the truth is, that is true about all of us. We are much worse sinners than we know. I think it is so easy for us to ignore the sin in our life. One day I was cleaning the house and made the comment to my wife, Anna, “You know, I didn't realize how dirty the house was. It wasn't until I started cleaning that I noticed all the dirt that had accumulating there.” And she wisely said, “It is a lot like sin in our life. It is there, but we don't notice it until we stop and look for it.”

In a Bible study I did this last year call The Gospel-Centered Life, I came across this chart (*slide shown*) that was really helpful for me. It shows that the starting point of the Christian life comes when I first become aware of the gap between God's holiness and my sinfulness. When I am converted, I trust and hope in Jesus who has done what I could never do. He has bridged the gap between my sinfulness and God's holiness. He has taken God's holy wrath toward my sin

upon Himself. At the point of conversion, I have a very limited view of God's holiness and my sinfulness, but the more I grow in my Christian life, the more I grow in my awareness of God's holiness and of my flesh and sinfulness. As I read the Bible, experience the Holy Spirit's conviction, or hang out with fellow believers, the extent of God's greatness and the extent of my sin become increasingly clear and vivid. It is not that God is actually becoming more holy or that I am actually becoming more sinful, but I am just much more aware. As I mature in my relationship with God, my perspective changes. I am increasingly seeing God as He actually is and myself as I actually am.

Then something else happens. As my understanding of my sin and God's holiness grows, my appreciation and love for Jesus grows. The more I am aware of the reality of the immense gap between God's holiness and my sinfulness, the more I am aware of just how amazing grace really is. You see, when we underestimate our sin and think that we are more righteous than we really are, in a sense we shrink the cross. Paul says in Galatians,

⁴ For if you are trying to make yourselves right with God by keeping the law, you have been cut off from Christ! You have fallen away from God's grace.

But as we fathom the immeasurable gap between God's holiness and our vast sinfulness, we realize there is no way we could begin to close that gap. We realize our only hope is for God to bridge the gap between our sin and His holiness. And that is what God did, right? Paul tells us in Romans 3 (*slide shown*),

²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

We gain right-standing before God just by accepting this gift of grace through faith, accepting that what Jesus did on the cross is totally sufficient to close that gap. We cannot add anything to it. Martin Luther calls this passive righteousness because we do not have to labor for it. It is not a righteousness we work for but a righteousness that is given to us by faith. Luther says we receive God's grace the same way the ground receives rain. We just open our arms to receive it. It is a free gift, but we have to ask for it.

I learned another thing here. Notice in our passage that Paul says we are given the righteousness of Christ. I have always taken this to mean that my sins are forgiven, which is true. In my mind I have always seen how my sin creates this huge debt to God and how the blood of Christ washes away my sin. That leaves my so-called bank account at zero. I don't know about you, but when my bank account is at zero, I tend to be a little nervous. So as a recovering perfectionist, that drove me strive harder and harder to earn righteousness so I don't slip back into debt. But that isn't living by grace, is it?

I am not very good at math but Martin Luther helped clarify this for me. You see, when we accept the work of Christ on the cross by faith, not only are our sins forgiven but the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. The righteousness of Christ is credited as being our very own in the eyes of God. I am not sure I can put a numerical value to the righteousness of

Christ, but I am sure it is more than what the U.S. owes China. Our accounts are not at zero. Our accounts are overflowing! Talk about a sense of security before God! When God sees us, He sees Jesus who stands in our place. Our acceptance before God has nothing to do with our performance but everything to do with the righteousness of Christ. We can cling fully to the promise that God is pleased with us because God is pleased with Jesus. Now that is amazing grace!

One of my favorite verses is Zephaniah 3:17 (*slide shown*),

¹⁷ The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

I think this paints a great picture of how God sees those who have put their faith in Christ. God's face is glowing with delight as He looks down upon us, so much so that He breaks out in song. God does not see us merely as a pardoned criminal but as His own son or daughter (*slide shown*) Pretty amazing, isn't it?

We know this grace can save us, but what difference can it make in our daily life? I think this is where Christians like me often struggle. The truth is that it makes *all* the difference as we learn to apply grace to our daily lives. My cop-out answer is to say that living by grace changes everything. My wife and I were brainstorming all the ways that applying grace to our daily lives change us. We had so many ideas that we realized it would take us nine weeks to tell you all of them (*slide shown*). So we decided to offer a nine-week small group called The Gospel-Centered Life beginning in October. We are going to offer one group on Sunday mornings and another on Tuesday nights. There is more information on that in *CPC Life*.

But I can't leave you hanging until then, so here are a few quick highlights for you. First, **grace frees me to become the person God created me to be**. If I embrace that I am fully accepted by God, then I do not have to be driven by my self-imposed perfectionism or driven by my worry of what others think about me. I was struck by this quote by Martin Luther (*slide shown*). He says, “At the root of all visible sin lies the invisible struggle for righteousness (self-worth) and identity.” Interesting, isn't it? Think about how much misguided energy we spend trying to build up our self-worth, trying to be cool, trying to fit in, trying to feel good about ourselves, or just trying to fill that empty place inside us. Our identity is secure in Christ. We are completely loved and embraced by God our Father. To paraphrase, Max Lucado, “God loves you just the way you are, but He loves you too much to leave you like you are.”

Which leads us to the second thing, **grace is the power behind transforming our lives**. Up to this point some of you may be thinking, “This grace thing is great. I can sin all I want and it doesn't matter!” Sorry to burst your bubble. Sin is still bad for you. I think sometimes we live in the illusion that sin is fun stuff that God is keeping from us, but the reality is that sin brings death and destruction everywhere it goes. Unfortunately we don't always see the consequences of our sins immediately and we think we have gotten away with it, but sin brings death and hardness to our hearts. Sin destroys relationships. Sin is bad for us, but grace has the power to release us from the bondage of that sin and give us hope for a better way. By grace we can be honest with ourselves about our sin, our weaknesses and our shortcomings, and we can ask for help. We don't have to pretend or be in denial any more.

Another thing is that **grace changes our motivation for being obedient**. We no longer are motivated to follow the rules out of duty or trying to appease God. We are motivated, well, for one reason because it is good for us but even more, because obedience just flows out of our relationship with Jesus. Obedience becomes the fruit of our love for Christ.

There is no abundant life in rule keeping, but when we live out of love, our life flourishes. I think of the example of a husband who buys his wife flowers for her birthday and gives them to her saying, "Honey, I got these for you because that is what I am supposed to do." Do you think his wife feels loved in that moment? But when the husband's heart loves his wife, he gives no thought to duty but freely buys her flowers as an expression of his joy and thankfulness for her. In the same way, as we experience the fullness of God's grace and love, we embrace this gift of grace God offers to us.

And so finally I would say that I am seeing how grace has the power to transform relationships. As the good news of grace becomes more real to me, I am more able to rest in God's grace, which then increasingly frees me up from my old ways of relating, comparing myself with others, trying to be in control, or being driven by my need to succeed. As a perfectionist my tendency was not only to expect perfection from myself but from other people as well. Grace is slowly but surely changing my perspective, showing me that we are all equal before the cross, sinners who are struggling and desperately in need of a Savior. And Jesus is that Savior!

As we learn to treasure and embrace the grace that God has given to us, that grace bears fruit in our lives that overflows out of us in the form of love and grace for others. I could say a lot more about grace today, but suffice to say that this gift of grace is an amazing thing. I encourage you to open your hearts up to God and ask for it.

Learning to apply grace to our daily lives is a life-long journey. As we close let me offer you two suggestions that will be helpful in learning to live in this grace. First of all, when you wake up each morning, I want you to picture God's face smiling down on you and hear His voice singing out "I love you." Remember you are God's beloved child.

And secondly, preach the gospel of grace to yourself every day. Remember daily your need for the cross, acknowledging that we are sinners in need of grace. Then embrace this grace and experience the fullness of the abundant life that God has for us. Let us pray together.

Father, we thank You for this amazing grace that has saved a wretch like me. Your love for us is so immense we can't even comprehend it. I just pray that You would open the eyes of our hearts to see You in a new way, to embrace Your grace and apply it to our lives so that it changes everything. We love You, Jesus. In Thy Name. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.