

**"Know the Grace of God" Romans 3:21-31 / John 1:14-18 (09/15/2024)**

It has been two months since my family came here to Westby. One of the things my family is thankful for is that there are restaurants around here that serve Asian food. We found a food court with an Asian fried noodle restaurant in Onalaska. My family liked to eat the noodles at the restaurant. One day, Sooho asked me a question on the way back home from the restaurant. "Daddy, why do we pay money after eating the food?" Now, Sooho has become his age, asking "Why" about everything. He always asks me "Why" questions in every part. A lot of his "Why" questions make me tired and difficult because most of his questions are very simple and easy questions. On the day after the restaurant, his question, "Why do we pay money after eating the food?" was so difficult for me. For the other questions, I tried to answer him from the perspective of children, but for this question about paying money, I had no idea how I should answer him. I do not remember how I answered the question, but I remember telling him about the relationship between values and trade. Of course, he could not understand my explanation. Paying money when we buy something is a very simple matter for people. Everyone knows that we should pay after eating at a restaurant.

I also made my church teachers feel difficult when I first became a Christian.

When I first attended a youth camp in New Zealand, my church teachers visited the camp to encourage the youth group students. They were worried about me and wondered how I was doing in the camp because they knew I did not have a good image of the church. At lunchtime, one of my teachers asked me, “Paul, did you experience God’s grace during the camp?” At this time, I did not understand the question. So, I asked again, “What is grace?” I do not remember how the teacher answered this question. But, I remember that the teacher could not give me a clear answer because since then, I have spent a lot of energy and time trying to find the answer to the question, “What is grace?” Having grace, receiving grace, and grace are very common and easy ideas for Christians, like paying money when buying something. However, Christians should know what grace is and what the grace of God is.

While preparing today’s sermon, I tried to think when I heard and used the word “grace” in my life, not in the church. I found I heard and saw the word grace in two parts.

One part was from my school professors. When I could not submit my assignment by the due date for reasons like family and health issues, professors said, “It is okay. I will give you some grace points.” They did not deduct the late

submission points. It was the first part of the grace I experienced outside the church.

Yes, my school was a seminary, so it still may have Christian ideas about grace. There is another use of the word “grace” for immigrants. The US government allows immigrants to stay 60 days more after their expired Visa status. People call this 60 days a “grace period.” The grace that I experienced outside of the church was something given to me when I was not qualified or when I was expected to have a penalty.

The Oxford English Dictionary explains the word “grace” like this, “(in Christian belief) the free and unmerited favour of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings.”

Therefore, we may be able to say that grace is “the free and unmerited gift of God when I was not qualified.” If we rephrase this sentence again, we can say, “Grace is the free and unmerited gift of God when we were sinners.”

In today’s Romans Scripture, Paul mentioned about the grace. Paul wrote this letter to Christians in Rome. Scholars assume that Paul wrote this letter during his third mission trip to Greece. Paul heard the sad news from Rome. He heard the division of the church between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. So, he wrote this letter to teach Christians in Rome about justification and righteousness.

Before this time, when Paul wrote this letter, there was an Emperor's persecution of Jews in Rome. The Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome in A.D 45. Because of this expulsion, the Gentile Christians became the main church members of Rome. After the death of Emperor Claudius, Jews could come back to Rome. Then, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians started to blame each other in the church. Jewish Christians blamed Gentiles because Gentiles did not follow the Law and inherit the Law. Gentile Christians blamed Jews because Jews crucified Jesus. They fought, each arguing that only they were righteous.

Paul wrote this letter to the Christians of Rome in this background. He said, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus," Grace is a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Now, we should think about the gift. When you give someone a gift, if that person says, "Of course I got this gift because I deserve it," how would you feel? I am learning a lot from my relationship with my son. And Sooho makes me sad when he says, "Daddy, do you give me this gift because I ate broccoli and did not fight with my sister?" My wife and I give him some gifts when he does a good job. We do this to teach him how he should behave. Sooho sometimes talks to me like this

even when I give him a gift because he is so precious. It is fine because it would be good if I decided to show unconditional love to my son. But the problem is that Sooho goes to Sua and teaches her. “Sua, if you do not clean the toys, you cannot receive a gift.” “Sua, only Big Brother can eat chocolate. You cannot.” The bigger problem is that Sua shouts and cries when she hears she cannot have a gift.

We should consider the gift. Of course, a gift is free. If we pay for a gift, it is no longer a gift. And if we think we deserve to receive a gift, the gift cannot express our gratitude, and our attitude can upset the person who gives us the gift. So, we cannot boast about ourselves. Paul said, “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works?” Paul taught the Christians of Rome that they could not blame each other and could not boast about themselves. We also cannot boast about ourselves. God showed grace to us, not because of our status or good works, but because God decided to show. Grace is a gift that God wants to give us.

We should also think about another thing about the gift. As we know, if we pay for a gift, it is not a gift anymore. However, we could receive a gift because somebody paid for it. Sooho could eat the noodles at the restaurant because I paid for it. Sooho could receive toys as gifts because his grandparents paid for them. Even

though Sooho had them free, someone paid for what he received. Then, who paid for the gift that was given to us? Who paid for the grace that God gave us? Grace could be the gift of God because Jesus paid for the grace of God. In today's Scripture, Paul said, "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Jesus paid his life for us. Jesus paid his life, so we could receive the grace of God as a gift. We could be justified and righteous because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Jesus not only paid his life for the free gift, but also he is the grace himself. In today's Gospel Scripture, John said, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." And he also said, "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the greatest gift that we could receive. Jesus Christ came to us as the grace of God. Jesus is the full of grace of God.

I hope to end today's preaching with a quote from John Wesley's sermon, "The Means of Grace." Wesley said in his sermon, "Yet once more. We allow (though it is a melancholy truth) that a large proportion of those who are called Christians do to this day abuse the means of grace to the destruction of their souls. This is doubtless the case with all those who rest content in the form of godliness without the power. Either they fondly presume they are Christians already, because they do thus and thus, although Christ was never yet revealed in their hearts, nor the love of God shed abroad therein: or else they suppose they shall infallibly be so, barely because they use these means; idly dreaming (though perhaps hardly conscious thereof) either that there is some kind of power therein whereby sooner or later (they know not when) they shall certainly be made holy; or that there is a sort of merit in using them, which will surely move God to give them holiness or accept them without it" The grace of God is a gift that God gave us. The grace of God is given to us freely, but it is not free. We could receive the grace of God not because of our good works, not because we work hard at the church, not because we love our neighbors. The grace of God is here with us because Jesus gave his life to us who are not qualified. We could receive the grace of God because Jesus came to us. God showed God's grace because of our faith. I hope we can be in the great grace of God this week. I hope we can be the humble people through God's grace this week. Amen.