



2. Grace

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
We give you thanks that you have not waited for us to seek you,
but have loved and cared for us
long before we could ever recognize, ask for, earn, or deserve your love.
As we engage in this study today,
we pray that you will help us recognize and understand
that your love for us is total, complete, and unconditional.
Amen.*

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe that grace happens.

Many Christians on our campuses and in the larger society believe that God requires some action on the part of individuals before they can be “saved” and restored to right relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Some earnest, sincere, and Bible-believing Christians use language about “accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior” or “letting Jesus into your heart” as though the responsibility for the salvation of sinners rests with individuals who somehow must initiate a relationship with Jesus.

Presbyterians emphasize the grace of God. “Grace” is love that is unconditional, unearned, and undeserved. While there are some passages in the Bible that suggest that individuals must act in certain ways in order to get God to love them, Presbyterians believe that the message of the Bible as a whole is that God has always loved us, will always love us, and loves us right now. We believe God’s grace is present in our lives whether or not we

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ever ask for, deserve, or earn that love. Presbyterians reject any suggestion that God's love has prerequisites. We believe God's love precedes any action on our part. We believe we are safe (saved) because of what God does, not because of anything that we do.

Through the centuries Presbyterians have prayerfully studied the Bible together and reflected on our common experiences as we live in relationship to God in Jesus Christ. We have realized that God's love has been present in our individual lives and in our life together even when we didn't recognize it; even when we did not live faithfully in relationship with God and each other; and even when we fooled ourselves into pretending that we had somehow earned or deserved God's love.

When we're at our best and when we're at our worst, God's love is there. Grace just happens.

The story is told of a man visiting the South for the first time. On his first morning in that region, he went to breakfast and ordered bacon, eggs, and toast. After a few minutes, the server brought him a plate with bacon, eggs, toast, and some other lumpy white stuff. Pointing to the unusual item on his plate, the man said, "What's this?" "That's grits," the server replied. "I didn't order any 'grits,'" the man told her. "Honey," she replied, "grits are like God's grace—you don't have to order it, it just shows up."

Grace is a difficult topic for many contemporary American Christians to embrace.

There is a strong element of self-reliance in the dominant American culture.

As the culture has developed, that strong sense of independence and self-reliance has grown into a capitalist economy based on transaction and exchange. We tend to presume that anything of value that we receive from someone else is going to cost us. Many of us presume that the really immutable truths—the statements that are ultimately to be trusted and are beyond question—are economic ones.

- You don't get something for nothing.
- You get what you pay for.
- There's no such thing as a free lunch.

The statement that salvation—the state of complete and unquestionable safety in our relationship with God—is entirely the result of God's grace is at odds with many of our notions of the way things really are. "Surely it's not that easy," many of us are likely to conclude. "God wouldn't just save us whether we did the right things or not. God must require something from us. After all, everybody knows you don't get something for nothing. You get what you pay for. There's no such thing as a free lunch."

Presbyterians believe our salvation is in fact a free gift from God. There are no conditions. There are no requirements. There is no exchange. It's not transactional. We who have placed ourselves in danger by separating ourselves from God and each other are simply made safe through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the central story of the Bible. Despite the inarguable fact that we do not deserve and cannot earn God's love, God has made us safe. That's just what God does.

1

Consider **Ephesians 2:4–10**:

EPHESIANS 2:4–10

**but God, who is rich in mercy,
out of the great love with which [God] loved us
even when we were dead through 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 ages to come [God] might show
the immeasurable riches of [divine] grace
in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus,
For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—
not the result of works, so that no one may boast.
For we are what [God] has made us,
created in Christ Jesus for good works,
which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.**

Check out that grammar. This passage is not primarily about us, the readers. *God* is the one who:

- “loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses;”
- “made us alive together with Christ;”
- “raised us up with him;”
- “seated us with him;”
- will “show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus;”
- “made us what we are;” and
- “created us to walk in the good works that God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

The only verb in this passage of which humans are the subject is a passive voice verb: we “have been saved.”

Salvation stories are stories about what our gracious, merciful, patient, forgiving, loving God does.

2

Consider the Parable of the Good Samaritan (**Luke 10:25–37**).

LUKE 10:25

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

By placing this question in the mouth of a “lawyer” (probably a Pharisee who was well versed in the details of the Hebrew Scriptures), Luke sets up this story as an encounter between Jesus and a learned and faithful member of the local Jewish community.

Note the particular language of the lawyer’s question: “What *must I do* to inherit eternal life?” Think about that grammar as we get further into the story.

LUKE 10:26

He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

Understandably, Jesus answers the lawyer’s question by asking him about the law.

LUKE 10:27

He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.”

In response to Jesus’s question, the lawyer, accurately and appropriately, quotes **Deuteronomy 6:5** and **Leviticus 19:18**.

LUKE 10:28

And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

“Good job, man.”

“You nailed it.”

LUKE 10:29

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Pay close attention to Luke’s characterization of the lawyer’s motivation.

The lawyer asks this follow-up question in verse 29 because he wants “to justify himself.” To “justify” is to place in right relationship. By telling us the lawyer asked “who is my neighbor?” because he desired to *justify himself*, Luke is pointing out that the lawyer is asking Jesus what he has to do to get himself into right relationship with God. Remember his language from verse 25: “what *must I do* to inherit eternal life?”

Think about writing a paper for class. In order to make the paper look right, you (actually, probably your computer) will “justify” the left margin of the document so that the beginning of each line lines up with the beginnings of the other lines. The lines need to be in right relationship with each other.

To “justify” is to place in right relationship.

Jesus tells the Parable that follows in response to a lawyer who assumes that there are actions that must be performed in order to inherit eternal life; that there are things *he* has to do to place himself in right relationship with God.

LUKE 10:30

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead.

It was probably foolish for this traveler to try to get from Jerusalem to Jericho alone. He ended up in a desperate situation.

LUKE 10:31–32

Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

It’s too easy to simply dismiss the priest and the Levite as selfish, insensitive, cowardly jerks. Priests and Levites were individuals who had particular roles in the religious life of the whole community. They regularly performed sacrifices in the Temple before God on behalf of the entire faith community.

Those sacrifices were seen as essential features of the ongoing, day-to-day interactions between God and God’s people. If the priest or the Levite here in verses

31 and 32 had in fact paused to check on the ambushed traveler, and it turned out that the traveler was dead, then they would have been ritually unclean for a certain period and consequently unable to perform their duties to the community as a whole (see **Numbers 19:11**). They were probably just doing their jobs and trying to be responsible.

LUKE 10:33

But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with pity.

It's hard for contemporary readers to have a sense of how shocking it would have been for first-century Jews to hear or read a story that suggests that a *Samaritan* could ever be an exemplary hero. There are examples throughout the Gospels of the tension and animosity between Jews and Samaritans.

Imagine as you study this story now that this new character in Luke 10:33 is an obvious and ardent supporter of whatever national political figure you respect the least, somebody who you think is consistently and aggressively wrong about almost everything.

Sit with that for a moment before you proceed.

Then you'll have a sense of what it would have been like for a Jewish lawyer to hear Jesus tell a story in which a Samaritan is the hero.

LUKE 10:34

He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

Before discussing the Samaritan's actions in this story, it is important to note that there are at least three things that the Samaritan does *not* do when he sees the ambushed traveler.

1. He doesn't call a press conference to announce his plans to save the traveler.

There is no press agent. There are no microphones or cameras. The Samaritan doesn't make any speeches. He doesn't take a selfie. He doesn't publish a Tweet about his plans to save the ambushed traveler. There's no indication that the Samaritan does what he does for attention.

2. He doesn't do a jewelry check to see if the ambushed traveler is religious enough.

There is no mention of the Samaritan checking for fish rings, “I Am Second” tattoos, cross necklaces, WWJD bracelets, or baptismal certificates.

3. He doesn't do a background check to see if the ambushed traveler has done enough good works to deserve to be saved.

There is no “works audit.” The Samaritan does not spend any time determining whether or not the ambushed traveler deserves to be saved.

He just takes care of him.

Could it be that this whole story is intended to help the lawyer and the rest of us recognize what Jesus does for us?

Does Luke recount this story to remind his readers that, like the Samaritan, Jesus takes care of us, rescues us, and makes us safe?

Jesus tells this whole story to answer the lawyer's question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus' answer?

ZERO. ZILCH. BUPKIS. NUTHIN.' NADA.

“You don't have to do any more to be saved than that ambushed traveler did.”

Presbyterians believe the story of God's saving love for us in Jesus Christ is not a story about us. It's not about what we do.

It's about God.

It's about how, in Jesus Christ, God treats each of us like the Samaritan treats the ambushed traveler. God responds to our separation from God and each other by coming all the way to us and doing everything necessary to rescue us, make us safe, and restore us to right relationship with God and each other.

By the way, later in Luke's Gospel (in chapters 22 and 23) Jesus will be more fully rejected by the community than any Samaritan as he is betrayed, arrested, and executed.

LUKE 10:35

The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.’

So the Samaritan takes the ambushed traveler to a safe place, entrusts him to the care of the innkeeper, provides some resources for the ongoing care of the traveler, and promises more and sufficient resources in the future.

There are multiple ways for us to see ourselves in this verse—as members of the church in general and UKirk communities in particular.

We can identify with the traveler in this story. There is a sense in which we all, having once been ambushed and abandoned, have been noticed by God in Jesus Christ, cared for, and led into community with others. It can be helpful for us to think about our faith life in those terms. We haven't really earned or deserved much, if anything, that has been done for us in our lives.

We can also identify with the innkeeper. We, too, are part of communities to which Christ brings other rescued travelers. We are among those to whom Christ gives gifts and resources to care for others.

LUKE 10:36

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

In his answer to the lawyer's "Who is my neighbor?" question in verse 29, Jesus asks here in verse 36 "Who was the ambushed traveler's neighbor?"

It's important to note at this point that Jesus is inviting the lawyer to identify with the traveler and not the Samaritan.

LUKE 10:37

**He said, "The one who showed him mercy."
Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."**

The punchline of this story is "Go and do likewise." That's legitimately interpreted throughout the church as a call to notice and care for people in need, to stop and help folks who have been ambushed and abandoned. That's an important lesson of this story.

But we also need to recognize that this is a story about grace.

The story begins with the lawyer's question about what must be done to be saved ("What must I do to inherit eternal life?"). Jesus tells the Parable to teach the lawyer that he can't *do* any more to inherit eternal life than the ambushed traveler did to get himself saved. Only after making that point does Jesus invite the lawyer to respond to grace by serving others.

CONCLUSION

Grace is an important concept for Presbyterians as we think about our relationship with God.

Without this important understanding of grace, we risk the arrogance of thinking that, despite the fact that we are all sinners, we can somehow do the right things to make God love us.

Without this notion of grace, we risk the despair that comes with the recognition that, in our fallen and sinful state, we will never be able to do all the things that God requires and expects of us.

Biblical passages such as **Ephesians 2:4–10** and **Luke 10:25–37** enable us to recognize that God's love for us is constant, complete, and unconditional. God's love for us is not related at all to any actions on our part that somehow qualify us to be loved by God in a way that would not otherwise have been true.

Presbyterians insist that the story of our salvation is a story about who God is and what God does. It has nothing whatsoever with anything that any of us can or must do to earn God's love.

Presbyterians believe grace happens.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Do you buy that “grace” stuff or does it seem unfair and illogical to you that God would just love everybody whether they deserve it or not?
- Are you aware of Christians on your campus or in your community who believe that individuals must do something before being loved and forgiven by God?
- Can you think of ways to respect and love those people without adopting their ways of interpreting the Bible?
- Does that even matter?
- If God's gonna love you anyway, does it make any difference how you act? How you treat people? How you treat yourself?

This question will be addressed in the third study of this series: “Response.”

- Is language about “salvation” or “getting saved” helpful to you?
 - Do you believe you need to be “saved” from anything?
This question will be addressed in the seventh study of this series: “Nobody’s Perfect.”
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