

Sermon

Grace. What is it? G-R-A-C-E: **God's Riches at Christ's Expense**. God is rich in his love for you, no matter who you are. That is why Jesus died upon the cross and rose again from the dead for you. Christ paid the price so that you could have all of the Riches of God. How does He do that? How does He view us and help us to view others as He views them?

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today we hear about God's grace in a unique way in Acts 10, where Peter proclaims, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (vv 34–35).

4.

God shows no partiality. That's the way it is with His heart of grace. His love reaches to anyone, anywhere—all nationalities, all races, all ages, all types of people, rich or poor, lifelong Christian or new believer. God's love reaches to you who have known and worshiped God as long as you can remember, and his love reaches to you who are searching to fill the emptiness in your lives. No one is out of the reach of God's love. Yes, God our Savior "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). Aren't you glad that's true for you? That you are included among those God desires to save? Aren't you glad that it's true for everyone else? (And I mean *everyone!*)

Are you glad? Do you see all people as God sees them? Do you love them all as God loves them? Does our congregation? Is our congregation a place of grace in a cold and lonely world, a place where we are eager to connect all people to God's love for them in Jesus Christ? All people?

What is our experience with people? It's that the people around us can be so difficult to love! You've been hurt by the words and actions of people. Close relatives have disappointed you, have failed you. At work, you may have been passed up for a promotion by someone who didn't deserve it when you did. See *those people* as God sees them? Love *them*? A little self-evaluation and honesty should cause you and me to understand that we are difficult to love too. Folks are supposed to love *me*? As unloving as *I* can be?

If you struggle with seeing people as God sees them and loving them as God loves them, join the club! Peter and the other earliest Christ-followers were Jewish believers, and God brought his Son, Jesus, the Messiah, first of all to the Jews in the region of Israel, in places like Judea and Galilee. It made sense to Peter, John, James, and the other Jewish believers that they, "children of Abraham" and members of the household of Israel, were part of God's family through Spirit-given faith.

But for those earliest followers of Jesus, God's grace toward those *outside* the chosen people of God, outside Judaism, was difficult to accept. Would God be so lavish with his grace that he would pour out his Spirit on the Gentiles too? So impartial with his love that he would welcome them into his family?

The disciple Peter was one of those doubters. It took a God-given vision for Peter to understand this impartiality of God concerning those outside the circle of his people, the chosen children of Israel. Do you remember the God-inspired vision? It happens earlier in Acts 10, in verses 1–33, just before our text today. Peter is hungry, and he has a vision about food being let down from heaven on a sheet. The foods he sees are various animals and reptiles and birds—foods that were unclean according to Jewish law. In the vision, God tells Peter to kill and eat them. After Peter protests that this food is unclean, God says, "What God has made clean, do not call common" (v 15).

The message for Peter? Well, at that very moment, Peter receives a request from a man named Cornelius—a Roman soldier, a centurion, a Gentile, not a Jew—to come to his house. Turns out, Cornelius has had a vision too. So Peter goes to his home. When he arrives and sees a whole crowd of Gentiles eager to hear God's Word from him, he gets it! "God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean" (v 28). Peter went on to proclaim the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection to Cornelius and the other Gentiles that day. He said, "To [Christ Jesus] all the prophets bear witness that *everyone* who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (v 43, emphasis added). The Spirit fell on these people, and they were baptized. God showed no partiality. His love engulfed them, and they were saved.

3.

It is clear that God loves all people and that he desires all to be saved through faith in Christ. In this sense, no one is unclean or common in his sight. But there is also a sense in which all people *are* common and unclean. I'm referring to the sin that clings to us all. Everyone has it. We're all unclean sinners. God sees this sin clearly in the worst of us and in the best of us, in people of all types and ages, all nationalities, all races, in all places. Sin deserves God's punishment. It deserves death, even eternal death.

And sin sure creates problems among us. Showing partiality ("playing favorites") is the sin God's Word is uncovering today. And this sin of showing partiality can have immense consequences. In our partiality, we might listen only to conservative talk radio and not to other points of view. We might value the opinions of longtime church members but disregard the opinions of new members. We might talk with our friends at church while we ignore the others who really need a friend. We play favorites.

Our playing favorites, our showing partiality, can result in feelings of superiority or inferiority, depending on the side we're on. It can lead to an attitude of "this is my church, not yours," with the result that others feel, "If this is your church, I don't want anything to do with it!" or worse, "If that's what your Jesus is about, I don't want anything to do with him!"

2.

We need help. Some divine intervention. And God delivers that help and intervention. God sent Jesus into this world as the divine partiality-buster. Yet, Jesus hardly looked divine. He was a common man, blending in with the young men of the villages of Galilee and the crowds in Jerusalem.

But there was something strikingly different about him too. Jesus showed no partiality. He did not play favorites. He crossed the boundaries of society, bringing hope and forgiveness to shepherds and fishermen, to the woman at Jacob's well who'd had five husbands, to a chief tax collector in Jericho. He healed. He restored. He fed. He taught as one who had authority, for he was God in human flesh.

As the God-man, Jesus perfectly loved and obeyed his heavenly Father. Even though he was the sinless Son of God, he was the victim of gross injustice and partiality. He was accused by his fellow Jews of falsely claiming to be God and by the Romans of claiming to be a king. Death by crucifixion was his sentence. It was surely the greatest injustice of all time, that sinful men nailed Jesus to the cross, but it was the heavenly Father's *plan* that this punishment should happen to his beloved Son. For Jesus was the Father's promised Lamb of God, who would take away the sins of the world, the righteous for the unrighteous, the impartial for the partial. Yes, God the Father laid on his Son the guilt of us all! My sins were on Jesus. Your sins were on him. The sins of all people of all generations, all nationalities, all races, all ages, all types of people in all places. God shows no partiality.

Jesus suffered on the cross. He died. But on the third day, he rose from the dead. This was the great sign that the Father accepted the sacrifice of his Son. The sign that sin is forgiven and that life wins. Nothing could stop the apostles from proclaiming the Good News of the resurrected and victorious Savior, and nothing should stop us either: "*Everyone* who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (v 43). Everyone! God shows no partiality. This includes you, my brother in Christ, my sister in Christ, for God loves you.

1.

We are the people who belong to the Church of the risen Lord Jesus Christ! He is alive, and his Spirit is active among us. The Spirit is moving to make us a community of believers who know and rejoice that we are dearly loved by God. But there's more Good News. The love that saved us is the love that also transforms us! Living in that love of God, we can be different people, people who don't play favorites, people who willingly and joyfully love and serve all types of people.

What might this transforming love of Jesus look like for you in your relationship with your family, with those at work and at school? That spouse, that brother or sister, that co-worker or fellow student is dearly loved by God. Jesus died for them too. He saves them. How will you show your love and acceptance to

them?

What can the transforming love of God for you and for all of us mean for our life together in our congregation? We live in an impersonal world, a harsh world. People yearn for community, a place to belong, a place where they are loved and accepted. This kind of church will listen. It will serve. This kind of church will attract others. This kind of church will connect others to the love of Christ, which knows no boundaries and forgives all sins. For God shows no partiality, and neither will we in our congregation.

God Corrects Our Vision So That We Can See People as God Sees and Love People as God Loves.

Because of God's grace and mercy, He corrects us so that our congregation does not play favorites; the people there showed no partiality. Here, you hear of God's riches for all people at Christ's expense. May God continue to strengthen and change us, that we may see others as He sees them and love them as He has loved us.

May the Peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.