

Date: January 8, 2022

Series: *This Is...*

Title: *Grace*

Text: 2 Corinthians 8:9; 5:14-15; 1 Peter 4:10

Preacher: Mark Adams

Welcome UPWARD teams and parents!

I think most of you have heard of John Wooden---famous basketball coach of the UCLA Bruins. He was a devout Christian and left us for Heaven in 2010 at the ripe young age of 99 years and 8 months---but even today he is still known for his skill in coaching.

In his years of coaching at UCLA he was nicknamed the *Wizard of Westwood* and led his Bruins to win ten National Collegiate Athletic Association championships in a 12-year period---including a record seven in a row. I believe he won more of those championships than any other coach.

Can you imagine being selected to play on HIS team? Think how excited you would be as you started that first practice. You would have wondered exactly how your famous coach, John Wooden, would set the tone for the season to come. Well, you wouldn't have had to wait long to get the answer to your "wondering."

Of course, veterans knew what was coming. But as a first-year player you would no doubt have been perplexed by the very first lesson given by their Hall of Fame coach.

Are you ready for this all-important foundational tactic in basketball imparted by the *Wizard of Westwood*? Here it is. Coach Wooten taught his players---step-by step---no pun intended---HOW TO PUT ON THEIR SOCKS and how to lace up their shoes. And---he didn't teach this lesson only once. He taught it before every game and practice.

Why?

Wooden had discovered that many players didn't properly smooth out wrinkles in the socks around their heels and little toes. If left uncorrected, these wrinkles could cause blisters that could hamper their performance at crucial times during games. And---not lacing those chucks just right would also cause problems. Your footing would be off.

Many players thought the practice was odd and laughed about it. Wooden knew that but would not compromise on this basic fundamental principle. He once put it like this: *"I stuck to it. I believed in that, and I insisted on it."*

Like those brand-new Bruins---as Christians, we mustn't forget the basics. Otherwise, we run the risk of developing painful spiritual blisters that can hurt us as we run the race that is set before us. For that reason, we are beginning this new year with a sermon series I've entitled: *"This is..."* Each week I'll end that sentence with a basic that we must remember and embrace if we are to grow as Christians---and as a church.

Today we begin with...GRACE.

With that in mind follow along on the screen or in your app as I read our text for this morning: 2 Corinthians 8:9; 5:14-15; 1 Peter 4:10. And if able, let's all stand in respect for God's Word as it is read.

2 Corinthians 8:9

9 - For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes, He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15

14 - For Christ's love compels us [DRIVES US], because we are convinced that One died for all, and therefore all died.

15 – And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him Who died for them and was raised again.

1 Peter 4:10

10 - Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

I don't know if you've ever spent much mental effort reflecting on this fact or not, but our minds---our brains---are truly amazing things. I did some study on this subject a while back and discovered that the human brain is approximately 78% water and on average weighs about three pounds. It contains one hundred billion neurons held together by two trillion packing cells which make it capable of storing six hundred memories per second for your entire lifetime. That comes to one trillion, four hundred nineteen billion, twelve million memories per brain, per life, on the average---which means that this amazing lump of flesh that God has situated inside our skulls records virtually everything we ever do or think or say or hear or experience---everything!

I can't imagine how many terabytes of ram the human brain contains! But if you are like me, when it comes to your brain---your problem isn't STORAGE. It's RETRIEVAL! I guess you could say that, as we age, our CPU speed diminishes.

This past week we spent several days with our three children, their spouses and our 6 grandkids---and I confess about half the time I called someone by the wrong name. Phrases like these flowed from my mouth: *"Luke! I mean---Nathan!" "Joe! I mean---Andrew!" "Lydia! I mean---Emma!" "Daniel---I mean Sue!"* All their names are stored up here---but with 14 people running around---and names constantly being demanded---my retrieval system was over-taxed!

I'm reminded of the story of two elderly women who were discussing the problems of growing older. One commented, *"The worst thing is when your memory starts to go. I've known you all my life and I can't think of your name at the moment. By the way, what is it?"* The second lady thought for a moment and said, *"Do you need an answer right now?"*

Well, all of us, no matter what our age, have memory retrieval issues at times. And one retrieval problem I NEVER want Redland to face is that God has called us to be a *"Grace-driven people for a grace-needing world."* I loved hearing Rev. Crawford say that throughout our two-state convention Redland is known for its grace. I consider that high praise indeed. I even said AMEN as I watched online but I don't think he heard me!

You may have FORGOTTEN, or more likely weren't here back then---but in early 1998---after a lot of meetings and a great deal of prayer---our staff and church leaders came to understand that God had called us to be a church that is known for its grace.

And this was and still is a significant calling because we do not live in a grace-filled world. In our society you get pretty much what you pay for. You reap what you sow. I mean when was the last time you drove around the beltway at the height of rush hour and saw grace? How often do people roll down their windows and say, *"Grace to you. I forgive you for cutting me off. I turn the other bumper!"* When it comes time to pay all your Christmas bills and you discover that you charged more than you could afford, if you called VISA and explained, would you expect them to respond: *"Don't worry about it. Just pay what you can, and we'll forget about the rest."*

No, things like that don't usually happen in our world because Grace is an increasingly RARE thing which is why as Michael said last week---ours is a world full of trauma. And unfortunately, one of the places where grace is scarcest is in the church. Too many believers are not very good at dispensing the grace they have received. Too many times too many of us tend to dole out more legalism and judgment than we do grace---and Christians across the nation have done so A LOT in the last three years in the way they expressed their opinion on the vaccine, and masks, and politics---and racism--and the word we use to describe what happened on January 6.

Too many Christians in too many churches have embraced an *"us vs them"* as they think of their brothers and sisters in Christ. This is one reason so many churches folded during these difficult years. Prior to COVID evangelical churches in the

U.S. averaged 220 in attendance. Today that number is 150. That's a drop of about 35%. The divisiveness caused by this weird legalism is also why 50% of pastors this year alone said they would resign if they could find another way to make a living. It's been so hard to preserve the unity of the body of Christ.

My point is grace is rare in our world---and it's gotten rarer in the church in these past three years. It is as Philip Yancey put it, *"Christians have spent enormous energy over the years debating and decreeing truth; every church defends its own particular version. But what about grace? How rare it is to find a church competing to 'out-grace' its rivals."*

The answer is not many.

But back to my recounting of RBC history. In 1998 we had a large influx of people coming from legalistic churches in our area---churches where they had experienced the kinds of trauma Michael talked about. They were drawn to Redland by its loving, unconditional welcome. In fact, it was at the end of our weeks of prayer about a vision for RBC, that one of those people shook my hand after the service said, *"Man---you've got a real Grace-driven Church here!"* And this was long before Rick Warren coined the phrase *"Purpose-driven."* Maybe he got the *"driven"* idea from us?

All kidding aside---that day in 1998 we felt that was God's answer to our prayers. He was calling us to be a church like Yancey described---a church known for its grace. Well, that was 25 years ago---and it's been a while since I've preached on grace---which is why I felt led to address it today. I thought about buying a few hundred UCLA SOCKS with the word "GRACE" embroidered on them as a reminder for you to take home---but realized that might be a bit too expensive.

So let me just say---my prayer is that today's message will stimulate the retrieval systems in our brains a bit so we can REMEMBER exactly what GRACE is---and then RE-embrace our calling from God and focus on being Grace-Driven.

Okay, time for "sock placement lesson #1"---what does the word *"Grace"* mean? The Bible teaches that basically GRACE is God's absolutely unmerited favor. It is His giving good to us that we could never hope to earn or deserve. It's God's goodness to us in all its forms---when in fact we deserve the opposite.

Of course, the greatest example of God's grace was when He sent His only Son to die for us. Do you recall those precious words from Romans 5:8? ***"God demonstrates His own love for us---His ABSOLUTELY UNMERITED FAVOR---in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."***

And God continues to bestow His grace on us each and every day, as He gives us other things we could never deserve or earn---like:

- His guidance in life-decisions
- His forgiveness when we disobey Him
- His strength when we try to do His will
- His comforting presence when we are anxious
- His healing power when we are sick

I could go on and on giving examples of God's constant grace because as Jeremiah put it: ***"His mercies are indeed NEW EVERY morning."*** (Lamentation 22:23) They are continual because GRACE means that bound up in our Heavenly Father is an inclination to bestow benefits on undeserving people, like you and me.

Now, as Jesus pointed out, a GOOD human might want to bestow a benefit or two on a DESERVING person.

- For example: if you are known as a hardworking employee, your boss may give you the afternoon off after you have worked long hours to finish an unusually difficult contract.
- Or, if you are a GOOD student, your teacher may give you a couple extra days to finish a term paper.
- Or if you are a good Upward Basketball player----your coach will give you one of the star awards.

There is nothing unusual about this type of behavior. We see this kind of grace all the time. But God's grace is far above this weaker human version. God's grace is as EXTRAORDINARY as human grace is ORDINARY. You see, He gives good things even to UNDESERVING people. It is His nature to do so.

Now, we could talk for hours about the many facets of God's extraordinary grace but this morning as I said a moment ago---I want us to remind ourselves of the basics and the first is this:

1. God's grace is NOT a NEW deal.

In other words, GRACE was not something God thought up when the Jews of the Old Testament failed to obey His loving laws. Some people wrongfully think God tried the ten commandments and the rest of the law and when that didn't work, He came up with PLAN B: *"The Grace Plan."*

But this is not true. Grace was God's original plan, set into motion long before the law was revealed to Moses. In fact, the purpose of the law was to show how much we are dependent on God's grace.

Here's something else to remember. Grace was offered BEFORE man was created. 1st Peter 1:18-20 says, ***"You were redeemed from your empty way of life with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen BEFORE the creation of the world."***

I'm saying that even before sin entered the world, Adam and Eve EXPERIENCED God's grace. Think about it.

- They had done nothing to deserve to be put into a lavish garden where all their needs were met by a loving Creator.
- They had done nothing to earn God's intimate fellowship in that heavenly place.

Even before they sinned---before the fall---Adam and Eve lived on grace.

So, the first thing we must remember is that GRACE IS NOT A NEW DEAL---God's grace has been around since before creation. Here's something else it's NOT.

2. Grace is not a SMALL deal.

God's grace is BIG enough to wipe out the sins of the entire world. As 1st John 2:2 says Jesus is, ***"the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins for the whole world."*** God's grace is definitely NOT a small deal. It's a VERY BIG deal! It's big enough to cover the sins of every human that has ever been born or ever will be born.

Another way to understand the SIZE of God's grace is to realize it is LIMITLESS IN SUPPLY.

God never runs out of grace. God doesn't give us a portion of grace when we become Christians and say, *"This is all you get. Make it last. Ration it out day by day. Don't run out because when you do, there is no more!"*

No, He gives grace after grace after grace in unending supply. As it says in John 1:16, ***"From the FULLNESS of His grace we have all received one blessing after another."***

God's grace is NOT a little thing. God's grace is big enough to wipe our biggest sinful acts.

I can't help but think of the former slave-trader, John Newton. After reading Thomas A Kempis' book *The Imitation of Christ*, Newton became a Christian. And as he began to grow in his relationship with Jesus---his hatred for the slave trade also grew. He left that vile kind of work and spent the rest of his life preaching---crusading---against slavery---confessing his great sin in his great hymn which begins, *"Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a WRETCH like me."*

In his old age both his memory and his sight began to fail. I want to show a clip from the movie *Amazing Grace* where it shows an aging Newton talking to William Wilberforce about his role in the slave trade:

<https://video.search.yahoo.com/search/video?fr=mcafee&ei=UTF-8&p=youtube+clip+from+movie+Amazing+Grace+with+Newton&type=E210US105G0#id=1&vid=bd1a5db983355fc163d7ba960dba7f48&action=click>

I love how Newton put it, *“My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!”* This is an important principle of grace for us to grasp because we I tend to classify sin---we think that there are certain people so sinful that God would not forgive them. I mean, we tend to believe that God’s grace is small---it’s just enough to cover average sinners but not extreme ones.

Thank God this is not true! His AMAZING grace shown on the cross of calvary is BIG enough to provide forgiveness for any sin, no matter how heinous.

- God’s grace is such that Vladimir Putin could be forgiven.
- So could have Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy.
- Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin could have been forgiven.
- Those people who walk into schools and shoot children could be covered by God’s grace.

All ANYONE needs to do---including these people---is ask---in Jesus’ name---and they would experience what Newton did---the incredible cleansing power of God’s amazing grace.

Grace-driven Christians understand the SIZE of God’s grace because of their own experience of and dependence on that grace. As C. S. Lewis once said, *“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”* This leads us to a third basic truth about grace that we must never forget.

3. It is not a JUSTICE deal.

You see, thanks to GRACE, repentant sinners do not get what justice would say they deserve.

Back in 2009 *Christianity Today* published a story about the scandal of the AIG bonuses. A.I.G. stands for *“American International Group.”* The story told of how over 400 employees received bonuses that year.

- Three-fourths of the company received more than \$100,000.
- Fifty-one employees received \$1 to \$2 million.
- Fifteen received more than \$2 million
- Six received \$4 million.
- The highest bonus stood at \$6.4 million.

Add all this up and it comes to right at \$165 million!

Why call this a scandal? Because these bonuses were handed out not only to employees but to the executives of a company on the verge of collapse, executives who had CAUSED that collapse. Under their leadership AIG had lost billions of dollars and then asked for and received a bail out from the U.S. government totaling \$182 billion dollars.

Yet this \$165 million was handed out---given by a company whose financial troubles were not only inflicting pain and distress on millions of investors---but were also threatening to take down a significant portion of the U.S. economy.

- President Obama said it made him *“angry.”*
- Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) said the executives should fall on their swords.
- Representative Paul Hodes (D-NH) said the company’s initials should stand for *“arrogance, incompetence, and greed.”*

I mean when this happened everyone on both sides of the political aisle cried for JUSTICE!

But before we join them---let's take a look at ourselves. Paul said all human beings are ***“filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”*** (Romans 1:29–31, ESV). The prophet Jeremiah said, ***“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”*** (17:9). I'm saying that in a very real sense, we are in the same situation as those AIG execs. We didn't "steal" billions---but we all sin. So---we ALL JUSTLY deserve death and separation from God.

Our loving Heavenly Father uses Paul to tell us we need not fear His justice---that instead we can experience the gracious forgiveness and cleaning offered to ALL who put their faith in Jesus.

In Romans 5:15-16 it says---and I paraphrase a bit, ***“But the free BONUS is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass--much more have the grace of God and the free BONUS by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free BONUS is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation---but the free BONUS following many trespasses brought justification.”***

THIS IS GRACE, an absolutely undeserved, totally UNJUST gift.

And this is so hard for us to comprehend. In fact, it may be the most difficult spiritual truth for any Christian to embrace. I mean, JUSTICE is so much easier for us to understand than grace.

- After WWII our parents and grandparents heard the horror stories of the concentration camp survivors in German. They were sickened and demanded JUSTICE.
- After watching peaceful civil rights demonstrations in the '60's being broken up by water cannons and vicious police dogs, many of us were ashamed and demanded JUSTICE.
- When terrorists commandeered planes and killed thousands of innocent people in New York and at the Pentagon and in a plane that crashed in Pennsylvania we were terrified and demanded JUSTICE.

But if any of us were to die tonight, which would we want to prevail? God's justice or His grace?

You see, if God is truly a God of only perfect justice and NOT loving grace, then there is nothing that will protect any of us from His divine judgement. If this were true then we would all be in a lot of trouble because as it says in the third chapter of Romans, ***“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and the wages of sin---the JUST and FAIR thing that we ALL deserve---is DEATH.”*** The fact is we DEMAND a God of justice but we all NEED---and are totally dependent on---a God of mercy and grace.

This brings us to a fourth basic truth about grace that I want us to remember.

4. God's grace is not an EARN IT deal.

In other words, grace means we don't do anything to EARN—to DESERVE---our redemption. Even that first nudging of faith that lead's a person to God is His gracious gift to us. As Jesus said in John 6:44, ***“No one can come to Me unless the Father Who sent Me draws him.”*** Having our sins forgiven has nothing to do with what we do---it's all based on our faith in what Jesus DID. As it says in Romans 3:24, we are, ***“Justified FREELY by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”***

This week I read about a 78-year-old man named Paul Goetchius who for the past eight years has logged over 64,000 miles on his Chevy Tahoe---bringing low-income kids home from colleges and universities all over New York State. The first student Goetchius drove to college was a young woman studying at the University at Buffalo. He had seen an article about a nonprofit that helps disadvantaged kids get TO college but nothing about how they would get home for Christmas break or at the end of the school year. So Goetchius thought, ***“Well, heck, I can drive a car.”***

Eight years later, he's still at it, and that first rider is now a physician. Sometimes the students need rides because their family doesn't have a car. Sometimes the students have no home. Goetchius says, ***“I've given rides to college to kids who were living at the homeless shelter or on a relative's couch. Some of these kids are incredible, what they overcome to get to college.”***

A young woman named Irby is a student Goetchius transported home all four of her years. She said she's not sure what she would have done without Goetchius' rides or his humility. She said, *"I always told him, 'We never thanked you enough,' and he was just like, 'I don't do it for thanks.'"*

Goetchius just does it for free---even with the rising cost of gas there is no charge.

Well, this generous retiree's graceful actions pale in comparison to what Jesus did for us. As it says in Romans 3:23, ***"The FREE gift of God is ETERNAL LIFE in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

So, understand, salvation is not something WE pay for. No—the payer---was and is GOD. The grace we enjoy cost HIM the unbelievable pain of seeing His only Son nearly flogged to death and then executed on a Roman cross. As the old acronym of the word grace put it: *"Grace is G.od's R.iches A.t C.hrist's E.xpense."*

While I'm talking about cost---I need to remind you that whereas becoming a Christian is FREE for us---but BEING one can be costly for us. It's hard to follow Jesus when the world is going the opposite way. As Bonhoeffer put it, *"There is a COST of discipleship"* but it is WELL WORTH it!

Now, maybe you are here today and are a Christian, looking for a church home and all this sounds pretty good to you. You want to be a part of a GRACE-DRIVEN church. If that describes you, we invite you to leave your seat, come forward and make this commitment today. Or maybe this basic knowledge of grace motivates you to do other things. Perhaps it drives you to ask God's forgiveness for some sin that you thought was too big for Him to forgive. Maybe it compels you to change the way you are responding to the sins of someone in your life, a friend or family member. You've tried justice and feel today that God wants you to try grace.

Or maybe you are here today, and God has used our study to draw you to Him. This has become a moment of truth as He graciously offers you the gift of salvation. Won't you admit your guilt and need and accept it today? As God's grace motivates you, won't you respond as we sing by coming forward and sharing your decision with me?

LET US PRAY