

North Heartland Matters
***“Grace”*: Why We Need It**
October 15, 2017

PRE-SERVICE VIDEO

**Worship Songs – Come Thou Fount / Whom
Shall I Fear**

Video – Behind the Scenes

**Drama – “X Marks the Spot”
Feature – How Can It Be?**

Would you pray with me?

Lord, we thank you for what we’ve just seen
illustrated in drama and song ... that, because of
your amazing grace, Jesus gave his life ...

- To right our wrongs
- To break our chains
- And to set us free from the curse of sin with
its sting of death and Hell.

For those of us who have experienced that grace, I pray that what I say would deepen our sense of gratefulness and awe at what you've done.

For those of us who have yet to understand it and to receive it, I pray that today would be the day.

And I know that these things are your will, so I pray them in the name of Jesus and for the sake of His Kingdom.

Amen.

Good morning everyone.

Today is the second message of three in a series we're calling *North Heartland Matters* – a very brief look at why we're here as a church; why we exist; why we matter.

And the reason I wanted to do this series is because, a couple of years ago, we decided that we

(meaning NHCC) should support a half-dozen or so non-profit organizations that are doing lots of good things in our community and our city instead of trying to do those things ourselves.

Instead of “reinventing the wheel,” it seemed wiser to assist those organizations (which we call our “Impact Partners) ...

- Through fundraising events and special offerings throughout the year
- As well as encouraging NHCCers who have a heart for the kinds of services our partners provide to become volunteers in those organizations.

And, as a way of promoting that particular vision – of making all of you aware of what we’re doing in this regard – we decided that every fall we would devote an entire service to featuring our partners and their amazing work ... which is what we did two weeks ago. If you were here that day,

you know that we showed many video interviews of the leaders of those organizations that gave us a sense of what they were accomplishing.

And a lot of what we heard was very moving. I had more than a few people afterwards comment how great it was that, not only do these kinds of organizations exist in our community, but also that *we as a church* are involved.

There was a sense of pride in that – and in a good way. I mean, *I'm proud* that we do this. *I'm glad* about the good works that are being done in the name of Jesus in this area and that we, collectively, get to be a small part of it.

At the same time, however, my positive feelings were (and are) somewhat tempered by *just a wee bit of apprehension* that, as we hold up and honor the work of these great organizations, we might also overlook the importance of what *we ourselves* are doing here.

One of the things about our work in comparison to that of our Impact Partners is that our “results” tend to happen slowly. What we do – the impact we have on people – typically takes a long time.

Therefore, when we look at the scope of all the good things that are being done by Christian organizations in this community (and throughout the world), there might be a tendency to underestimate the value and significance of being “the church” and doing what “the church” is called to do.

Truth is, for a lot of us – even those who are sincere Christians – the church is just kind of “there.” We don’t really *need* it. It’s nice to have around but we’re not exactly sure of why.

Teaching the Way of Jesus

So, last week, my goal was to demonstrate the *absolute necessity* of “the church” (our church and all other gospel-oriented churches) and “what

church does” ... by looking at one way in which our culture has been dramatically shaped by its influence and is dependent on it, even though most people would not think to credit the church.

And that is in the idea that we should do good for people who are not “our people” – people we don’t even know and may never meet – which is not only what our Impact Partners are about, but something that seems to be happening everywhere these days.

From ...

- Hurricane relief efforts carried out by volunteers from all over the country ...
- To GoFundMe pages for people who’ve lost everything in the Western fires ...
- To ordinary people who run towards danger instead of away from it to help strangers ...

... there is such a huge emphasis on helping others in need and of “giving back” in some way.

Why is that?

- Part of that is because of social media and 24/7 news coverage and the fact that we now know so much more of what's going on in crisis situations.
- Part is because of a positive “peer pressure” to look good in front of others.
- But a large part of it (as I said last Sunday) is because of the cumulative effect of *centuries of Christian influence* on our culture – whether we recognize that influence or not.

As I said last week, for hundreds of years in this country, *churches* of all kinds have taken seriously what is known as “The Great Commission ...”

... where Jesus told his followers to ...

“Go and make disciples of all the

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you.” *Matthew*
28:19-20 (NLT)

For hundreds of years in this country, *churches* have, as a central part of their mission, labored to teach what Jesus taught, *including ...*

... a radical and uniquely Christian principle that He introduced into the world 2,000 years ago: that a selfless sense of duty, heroism and compassion toward total strangers and even our enemies especially in the face of evil is a better way to live than the alternative.

That was the point of a story Jesus told which gave rise to the idea of being a “Good Samaritan” – a term that needs no explanation even to those who are not Christians or churchgoers. The Good Samaritan principle has become *that* embedded and established in our culture.

And *that* happened because of the collective influence of churches over time.

However, as our culture becomes more and more secularized, the church is losing its influence. If that continues – if the church fades away, the momentum from its teaching will also fade.

Eventually, values like “being a Good Samaritan” will be lost because the root of those values will have been removed. And we will produce more and more people who are confused, abused, sad, depressed, angry, broken, perverted, soulless and even deadly.

It’s already happening and with increasing frequency. The massacre in Las Vegas (as I explained last week) is a prime example. That which was unimaginable a mere 20 years ago has, today, become at least an annual occurrence ...

... which brings me back to the point ...

- That we, as a church, *matter*.
- That what we do here and what we teach here *matters*.
- And that it matters as much as the work of any of our Impact Partners; organizations that “do good in ways we cannot” because doing good, ultimately, has its roots in Jesus and what He taught.

All of which is why, as I said last week, if you’re a Christian – if you believe in Jesus and are trying to follow Jesus – you *need* to be a part of a church whether it’s this one or some other. You need to

...

- Join it
- Love it
- Serve it
- Give to it

- Pray for it

.. and most importantly, invite family and friends who do not know Jesus to come with you; family and friends who need to obey Jesus' teaching so that they can take hold of the life that is truly life.

Sharing the Good News

Now, having said *all of that* as an argument for “why we matter,” I’m a little concerned that it might sound like I’m *also* intending to say that “the greatest problem human beings have is that we don’t know how to live, so that’s why the church is here.”

In other words, “if we can just teach people the way of Jesus (while, of course, attempting to live it ourselves) and they will do it, then that will solve everything.”

But that is *not* what I am intending to say.

While there's no denying that things would be better (both individually and collectively as a culture) if everyone obeyed the commands of Jesus, truth is *that will not solve the greatest problem that human beings have ...* which leads to the *other* major assignment the church has been given; the *other* reason why we matter.

Not only did Jesus tell the church to make “disciples” (which basically means “learners” or “students”) and to teach those learners and students to obey His commands,

Jesus also said to ...

“Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone.” Mark
16:10 (NLT)

Our church – all of us together, collectively – and all other churches are called to share with our world the good news of what God has done to solve our greatest problem.

So, let's start with that – the greatest problem that human beings have (which could be called the bad news) and then we'll talk about the good news.

Our Greatest Problem

The Bible tells us that one day a young man came to Jesus with a question. “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”

In response, Jesus told him to keep all of the commandments of Moses.

“You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. Honor your father and mother. Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“I’ve obeyed all these commandments,” the young man replied. “What else must I do?”

Jesus told him, “If you want to be

perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

But when the young man heard this, he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus said to his disciples,

“I tell you the truth, it is very hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

The gospels tell us that the disciples were astonished:

“Who then can be saved?” they asked. Matthew 19:18-24 (NLT)

And you can maybe understand their astonishment. This guy was “the best of the best” that they and Jesus had encountered in their travels. In fact, in Mark’s rendition of this story, he writes that when Jesus heard of the man’s obedience to the Law of Moses, he felt great love

for him.

And yet, in spite of that, Jesus said that the man's unusually high level of "goodness" wasn't enough to make it into the Kingdom of Heaven ... which is bad news and ought to concern *us* because I doubt we would ever claim to live a life as pure as he did!

After all, if *he* isn't going to make it, then where does that leave *us*? (which was precisely the reaction of the disciples).

More importantly (at least for our purposes today), *why* isn't his "goodness" enough?

It's because of the greatest problem that every human being has.

And this is so important to understand. In fact, if you *don't* understand this, it will cause you all kinds of confusion and angst. It will lead you to doubt the goodness and justice of God.

You'll look around at people and say, "well, he or she isn't a Christian but they're a good person. Why would God reject them and send them to Hell? That's just unfair. Jesus might have taught some good things, but Christianity can't be right."

If that's your assessment of Christianity, chances are you do not understand the greatest problem we have and the good news of what God has done to solve it.

So what exactly *is* the greatest human problem?

The Apostle Paul once described it like this.

You were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins.

Ephesians 2:1 (NLT)

(And it's written in the past tense because he was writing to a group of people who had come to understand and believe the good news).

"Back then," Paul says, "you were dead."

Not ...

- “You just needed a little help.”
- “You had a bad childhood; you were taken advantage of.”
- “You just needed to be taught how to live.”

No.

You. Were. Dead.

And, again, this is critical to understand because a lot of people think “look, I’m not a really big sinner. I’ve not committed a murder. I’ve not cheated on my spouse or my taxes. I’m way better than a lot of other people.”

And that may be true. But the problem isn’t how much sin we’ve committed or how bad it is. It’s about how dead we are because of sin at whatever level. And there is no degree of dead. Dead is dead.

Now, obviously, Paul isn't talking about death as a physical condition because these folks – like you and me – were still walking around. They were still breathing. They were still alive in the body.

Instead, what he's getting at here (and in many other places where he writes about the human condition) is *something much more serious*. Paul is describing the state of being dead *spiritually*; dead *with respect to God*.

That's the biggest problem we have.

Well, not exactly. The news is even worse than that. The problem is even worse than that.

Paul continues ...

You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. (He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God).

*All of us used to live that way,
following the passionate desires and
inclinations of our sinful nature. By
our very nature we were subject to
God's anger. Ephesians
2:2-3 (NLT)*

... which really destroys how most of us think about ourselves and humanity in general.

To use the metaphor of the drama, we think that people are born with blank slates (so to speak). And if they do something bad enough or they do enough bad they get an “X” on their soul; something that says they’ve crossed the point of no return and God is justified in casting them out into the kingdom of darkness – “Hell” Jesus called it – where they will spend eternity.

And we can think of dastardly villains throughout human history who fit that criteria and deserve that fate ... like the guy who massacred and wounded all those innocent people in Las Vegas.

But that's not reality according to what Christianity teaches. Instead, reality is exactly *the opposite* of that scenario.

Reality is that you and I, by our very nature, are born with the "X." Paul says we are slaves to sin and to the devil ... which means that, by our very nature, we already belong to the kingdom of darkness. We don't move into it. We're born into it.

And, therefore, by our very nature (as Paul puts it), we are subject to the righteous anger – the wrath – of God against sin. *And justifiably so.*

Shocking isn't it?

Every single one of us is "spiritually stillborn" – dead in sin. And we belong to the kingdom of darkness which God in His justice will judge – *must* judge – at the end of time.

That's the biggest problem we have.

Again, I cannot overstate the importance of comprehending this vision of spiritual reality. If we do not ...

If we do not understand the greatest problem we have, not only will we doubt the goodness and justice of God; not only will we incorrectly assess Christianity ...

If we do not understand the greatest problem we have, we will never value the greatness of God's solution to our problem which is "GRACE."

We will never appreciate "grace" and why we need it.

And therefore, we will never open ourselves up to it and receive it.

God's Gracious Action

So, let's turn to that for a bit. Let's talk about some good news for a bit.

And let's start by defining exactly what we mean by "grace." And if you've been around NHCC for a while, you've probably heard this.

By "grace" we mean God doing for us what we do not deserve and cannot do for ourselves – with no strings attached.

Grace refers to the favor that God freely gives without expecting anything in return. Grace is God treating us better than we deserve and not because of anything we have done (or promise to do) and not because of anything God desires to get from us.¹ That's what I mean by "no strings attached." Grace truly is free.

Now, how does that – how does "grace" solve our greatest problem?

Let's pick up with Paul's train of thought on the matter.

After describing our greatest problem, he

writes:

God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!
Ephesians 2:4-5 (NLT)

Though we are sinners and do not deserve any help whatsoever, Paul says that God brings our spirit to life through Christ. *He* does everything; *we* do nothing because *we can do nothing*.

After all, the single most defining characteristic of dead people is that they have no power whatsoever. Not only can they *not* do anything they can't even *try* to do anything. They can't even do something that's *completely involuntary* – like breathing. They are totally without power.

The only hope for a dead man or woman is a resurrection!

Or, in the words of Jesus, to be born again – and this time, not because a man and a woman do something *physically* but because God steps in and does something *spiritually*. We need, again in the words of Jesus, to be “born from above.” We need God to make our spirit alive.

And that, friends, is ultimately what God’s grace accomplishes!

But, I think it’s also important to understand that this doesn’t happen through some kind of spiritual hocus pocus. It’s not God waves a wand and says “be gone all X-marks of sin! Come alive you sinners!” (or something like that).

Instead, God’s grace towards us required an action on His part – the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul explains it like this:

God was, in Christ, reconciling the

*world to himself, no longer counting
people's sins against them.
2 Corinthians 5:19 (NLT)*

In other words, something in what Jesus did made it possible.

And here's what it was.

*God made him who had no sin
[Jesus] to be sin for us, so that in him
we might become the righteousness
of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21
(NIV)*

Somehow, on the cross, Jesus, in the sight of the Father actually *became* sin. Somehow, all of the sin of the world – every single one that ever *had* been committed and ever *would* be committed – was imputed to Him. All the “demerits” that all humans through all time *had* earned and *would* earn were applied to His account.

And because God is righteous and holy and just, Jesus, who had become “all sin” in that moment,

was judged and rejected and cast out. He received the punishment that every sinner deserves: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

But that’s not all that happened.

Paul says that in that transaction (for lack of a better word), the perfect sinless life of Jesus – His total and complete righteousness – was imputed to those who receive God’s grace and brought to life. At the cross, all the merit of Jesus was applied to their account.

That means that, if you’ve received God’s grace, Jesus not only took *your* place; He put you in *His* place.

Which is why Paul could also write that ...

He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1:13-14 (NIV)

Receiving the Gift

Friends, this is what grace does. This is how God's greatest gift can solve our greatest problem.

Even though no one deserves it and no one can earn it, this salvation, this life, this rescue is offered to anyone, anywhere – no matter who they are or what they've done – free of charge with no-strings-attached.

- There is no requirement that we promise to try and live a better life.
- Or that we will somehow try to make it up to God or anyone else we may have injured.
- Or that we will in some way “pay it back” by “paying it forward.”

That's because Jesus has already lived the better

life we should be living and, on the cross, Jesus has already died the death we should die. He has already made it up to God. He has already paid it all.

However, just like any gift that is given, the gift of grace must also be received.

To put it another way: while God's grace is given unconditionally (no strings attached), His offer of salvation is not. It's conditional. It depends.

And this is also what confuses a lot of people because *it seems like* being rescued from the dominion of darkness – salvation, forgiveness of sins, redemption, raised to new life, whatever you want to call it – *it seems like* since it is the result of grace, it ought to be *unconditional*.

In other words, “Everyone, everywhere should be saved.” No one should ever have to do anything in response. It should just “be.”

And a lot of people – even a lot of church people – go through life believing that to be true and thereby putting themselves in great eternal danger because the truth is ... *while the grace of God is unconditional, His offer of salvation is not.* It depends on ...

Well, instead of me telling you what the condition is, let me show you from the scripture because this will be so helpful to you.

In chapter 10 of Paul's letter to the Christians at Rome, he starts talking about his spiritual heritage. Paul was Jewish.

He writes:

My heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.

And then he explains what he means by that.

Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

Romans 10:1-3 (NIV)

In other words, “instead of following the plan God has laid out in this matter, they’re trying hard to earn forgiveness and salvation by their own efforts. They don’t understand grace. They think salvation is a difficult thing.”

In fact, in the next couple of verses, Paul says that they believe they have to work their way up to heaven or work their way out of Hell.ⁱⁱ They think that is the message of the scripture.

Sounds like a lot of church people. Sounds like a lot of non-church people who don’t understand the Good News.

But that’s *not* the message, Paul writes.

But what does it say? (He asks

rhetorically)

It says ...

“The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Romans 10:8-9 (NIV)

For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved ... for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Romans 10:10,13 (NIV)

And that’s the condition.

In other words, God is saying “I will save you – I will rescue you, I will give you new life, *if ... you will call on Me.*”

“Not just understand Me. Not just know about Me.

Not just believe in Me. Not even work hard to try and please Me.”

God says, “I will rescue you from the dominion of darkness – I will save you, I will cause you to be born from above by my Holy Spirit – on the day that you believe that Jesus is who he says he is and did what he said he would do *and* you turn to me in humility and call on Me to save you.”

That’s the condition.

Call on the Lord

Now, here’s the deal.

Some of you have been here for a short while and some for a long time and you have never called on the name of the Lord for this. Oh, you’ve prayed from time to time about issues that are of concern to you. You’ve talked to God. But you have never called on the Lord to save you. You’ve assumed that his grace just sort of covers you like you

assume it just sort of covers everyone.

But it doesn't, for God says, "I will do this for you – my grace will become active in your life – *if* you will call on me."

And it's not hard to do that, He says, because the belief is already in your heart and the words are already in your mouth. You know the truth. You believe the truth. So you're that close to being saved. You just need to call on him.

So, how do you do that? How do you call on the Lord for salvation?

There are no magic words, but when you come to the point where you believe Jesus is who He said He was and you are ready to receive Him ... that's what you put into words.

You say something (aloud or silently in your heart) like this:

Jesus, I believe that You are who you claimed

to be.

I believe You are God in the flesh.

I believe You died on a cross.

I believe You rose from the dead.

You know, I'll bet some of you believe that but have never said it directly to Jesus. If you want to, you can say it to Him silently in your heart right now. I'll wait.

<pause>

And then you might say something like this:

I agree with you that I am a sinner

Even though I might be better than some,

I am not totally righteous in Your sight.

I am unable to atone for my sin.

And I'll bet that some of you believe that, too, but you've never said it directly to Jesus. If you want to, you can say it to Him silently in your heart right now. I'll wait.

<pause>

Finally, once you have declared that you believe in Jesus and admitted that you need Him, you open your heart and life to Him.

You might say something like this:

I accept what you did for me.

Please save me from my sin.

Come into my life and bring me into Yours.

Help me become who You want me to be.

And I'll bet that some of you want that but have never said it directly to Jesus before. If you'd like, you can say it to Him silently in your heart right now.

<pause>

Closing Prayer

- Jesus thank you so much for your grace that makes it possible for us to be rescued and made alive.
- Thank you so much for the people here this morning who are not only understanding, but who are calling out to you for salvation.
- <pray for them>

Amen.

Feature – Not Guilty Anymore

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. In a lot of churches, they ask people to walk the aisle to publicly declare their faith. That's cool. That's what I did as a teenager. But we don't do that here.

Why? Because in the New Testament we read that the public declaration of faith for a Christian was their baptism. We have one coming up in three weeks on Sunday

November 5th. Watch for details and sign up. You will be so glad you did. More about that in coming weeks.

2. Prayer person

3. Offering at door

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.whatisgrace.net/>

ⁱⁱ Romans 10:6-7