

The Gate to New Life

Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: Ephesians 2:4-10



But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved – ⁶ and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness towards us in Christ

Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

In the play “*Le Diable et le Bon Dieu*” (The Devil and the Good Lord), the main character is depicted as a war criminal who changed his life and became a “good” man. The play is a parody and shows that the main character, who is also the “good” man, was in no way good. He didn’t change his life without reason. On the contrary, he noticed that he could suppress people more if he took on the role of a “good” man. But the nature of the old war criminal is unchanged. He had merely learned that by playing the role of a “good man,” he could better suppress people. Sartre’s play is shocking and brings up the question whether people really can change? Is Sartre right when he says that we do everything out of selfishness? If that’s so, all of our role models in helping the poor; in giving money to the flood victims; in supporting the many refugees of the world are effectively called into question. And instead, the question comes up, why do people do good things for others? Is it only because they hope for hidden benefits? All of this can be described with the Latin term: “do ut des!” Translated, this means, “I give so that you may give.” When Sartre describes the “good” man in his play, he means exactly this. With this, Sartre wants to say: there is no such thing as a selfless gift in human affairs. People always want to get something in return. Even youngest children learn very soon that if they give a small flower or something else, they can get something in return. And so it goes for the rest of your life. Human life is founded not on grace, but on law. It’s the same in all human institutions. In school, in the family, at work, and everywhere in our lives, accomplishment will be rewarded, and bad deeds punished. With us, there is no such thing as a free gift by grace. We recognize this principle again and again in all cultures and all religions of the world. Yes, religions especially are particularly good at placing people under moral pressure. Indeed,

through religion, one can consult the Most High as a business partner. You can make a lot of money with God; you can suppress people and conquer entire nations with God.... all while looking like a "good" person. That is how we humans work.

But God works differently. You can't buy God. If God is gracious, then He is 100% gracious. God isn't gracious because He wants to get something in return. He freely gives it. And when God gives His grace, then everything changes. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul speaks about such people, whose lives were changed by God's grace. Paul describes people who had experienced a radical switch in their lives: Paul speaks about people who had worshiped other gods before and now became Christians. He also speaks about the Jews who had previously rejected Jesus as the Messiah but now had discovered Jesus as Savior and Redeemer in their lives. The words the Paul uses show that these Christians had really undergone a change. Before they were in darkness, now they are in the light; before they were children of Satan, now they are children of the living God; before they were dead in their sins and now, they are living and ready to do good works. At the same time, Paul makes one thing very clear. This great change is only possible because something new came into the lives of these people. These people came out of the bondage of selfishness and could be free! Paul describes what is necessary for people to truly change rather than simply carry on with their old habits. What makes everything different is the grace of God. Both in the letter to the Ephesians as well as in the other letters of the Apostle Paul, Paul speaks again and again about this grace of God as a foundation of faith and action. He knew himself to be the greatest sinner of the world because he had persecuted Christians... but he was able to change his life and begin a new life. Why? Because of the grace of God! This grace of God is the basis of everything that we do and don't do. And that is also what Paul establishes as the foundation of the church. That's why it's worthwhile to explain a bit better the term of "God's grace." In the Old Testament, the word "grace," in general, could be a good quality that stood out above all the others. The word was used for both a radiant diamond as well as for a person's good characteristic. A person who was gracious was also one who was so kind to you that their love was like a radiant diamond which reached the heart. This trait was especially clear when the person to whom grace was applied, neither deserved this grace nor had the ability to repay it. For example, when Joseph forgave his brothers, they stood before him with empty hands. But when grace was used in relation to God, it quickly became clear that God's grace had no limits at all. The entire Old Testament is actually an account of a nation that had repeatedly forsaken God and yet God was continuously gracious. This grace of God impressed the holy prophets so much that they repeatedly called upon God's grace alone because they knew that only God's grace could free them from the bondage of selfishness: for example, David sings in Psalm 51, "**God**, be merciful to me according to Your goodness, blot out my sins according to your great mercy." And yet, this grace of God remained an experience of individuals and didn't apply to everyone. That all changed when Jesus came into the world. Actually, the person of Jesus was God's grace encapsulated into one person and applied to all people at the same time! So, Jesus is God's grace in flesh and blood! In Jesus, people can see that the unending love of God is among us and becomes tangible. They

could see that God meant only good things for them. They could see that Jesus wanted healing, joy, and love for all of us. They could see that God always had the intention to love us. Jesus didn't even shy away from seeking out people who least deserved God's grace. With this, He repeatedly shows that God's grace has no limits and wants to reach everyone. Jesus also went to the deepest point of human existence, dying on the cross. Thus, it is clear that God's grace culminates in Jesus.

But this climax is not the end, rather the beginning. God's grace, that culminates in Jesus, is a source of strength that shines into the farthest corners of the earth. This grace also shines into our hearts as we live in the 21st century. To receive this grace, I don't first have to be grateful or become a mini-Jesus myself. No, the grace of God is active entirely without our assistance. It is God's power that flows and flows and flows.

¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Amen.