

Next Sunday we will be beginning our fall series that will take us up to Advent, and that series will be in the parables. But this Sunday, we wanted to begin---it being the first big Sunday of the fall---we wanted to begin by reminding ourselves of why we exist as a church and what we believe God has called us to as a church. And our vision statement, which is another word for mission, and the word 'vision' is another way of saying what God called us to be, is this: to experience and extend the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to Columbia, the region, and the world. But that can be all well and good, but it needs an undergirding, and that undergirding is the word of God. I wanted to take this Sunday as an opportunity, prior to our vision meeting tonight, to come to these verses which undergird this very calling, this mission, this vision. And it is Ephesians, the first chapter, specifically verses 7-10. It is here that Paul has already been talking about this great salvation that has been given to us in Jesus Christ, but the ways in which he unpacks it for us here, I want you to see how the grace of God is to be experienced, and then how it is to be extended.

So hear now God's word, Ephesians, chapter 1, verses 7-10.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment---to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God.

Will you pray with me. Heavenly father, help us to see this vision of grace that is given to us in your word through your apostle Paul. Lord, may you give us great hope. May you also give us a vision of what your grace is doing and what you call us to do as being a part of your work. So Lord, help us, we pray, to hear your word and then to live by it. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name amen.

So what I've done this morning, as you will see in your outline, I've given us three points there, and I wanted you to see it in the Scripture itself. We'll begin, and I'm using the specific language of the text itself in the very wording of the outline's main points. First, I want you to see what he gives to us is *According to His Grace*, verse 7. Then you will see how he also gives us revelation and privilege, *According to His Wisdom and Pleasure*, verses 8 and 9. And thirdly, *According to His Purpose*, verses 9 and 10, has he then set forward a plan where there will be one kingdom under one head. My desires is that you will see just how beautiful and just how believable is Jesus Christ.

So let's look together, then, at *According to His Grace*, verse 7. What I want you to see here is what I just read, and let me read it again, if you will give me that moment: In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. So you see there, that very clearly what he gives to us, everything that he gives to us in verse 7, is according to grace. What is it that he gives us according to this grace? Specifically, there are benefits which he tells us about in that one verse in very short phrases that are packed full of life. And I will tell you we could spend a month of Sundays, even a year of Sundays and not fully unpack what is here. But I will try to give you what I believe and see in this text.

What he tells us first that comes according to the riches of his grace are benefits. And these benefits are twofold. He tells us here when he uses these phrases: he gives us redemption through his blood and the forgiveness of sins. Those are the two benefits that he unpacks for us there. The benefits are, as he says, atonement and forgiveness for sins. Now I just used the word atonement,' and you don't see the word there, 'atonement.' But when he uses the phrase, 'redemption through his blood,' that is Paul giving to us the very biblical doctrine, the very old biblical doctrine, of atonement. Atonement is

the makeup of three English words: at-one-ment. In other words, God, through Jesus Christ, according to his grace, has brought two things that were separated, not at one, into oneness.

And he did this through Jesus Christ, when he says, redemption through his blood. It is a very old biblical doctrine that goes all the way back to the Old Testament, where we see there---if you've ever read through the Old Testament at all---you'll see you get to some very difficult passages, where the people of God are instructed that when they have sinned against God, they are indebted to him, so there needs to be a payment for that debt. Therefore God enumerates the ways and kinds of sacrifices that are to be given for particular kinds of sin. It doesn't take very long to read in books like Leviticus that atonement is a very bloody affair. And it becomes difficult to countenance, particularly in our 21st-century age. What we want to be able to do is, we want to say, 'Can't God just love?' Is his love just not enough? So what begins to happen, particularly in our modern day, we begin to play over the requirement for the payment of sin, and play only God's love.

But here we need to see that at the heart of redemption through his blood, at the heart of atonement, is something that is absolutely inescapable. And it's this. Let's use a very everyday idea. If you have a car loan with a bank, presently, and let's say you owe \$10,000 to the bank for the remainder of the loan that you have on the car, and you decided that tomorrow it would really be a much better idea if you simply went to the bank and said, you know, here's the deal. I'll give you \$7000, and we'll just call it a day. It's good, right? Now how many of us are going to be very successful in that? None of us. Because why? We recognize the everyday human experience that the payment has to fit the debt. It has to cover it.

Taking it a little bit farther. I've used this illustration before. A very dear friend of mine, Len Knoll, with whom I probably met once a week for ten years at a Starbucks in New Jersey. And over the period of ten years---thankfully, only twice---I spilled coffee on his suit...twice. Which meant that he then had to figure out some way to get home or do something before he could go to work because coffee was all over his suit. But what if I just simply said, *You know, we have good relationship, Len. We're all good, right? Because we're in a relationship. You like me. I like you. We're all good.* Now on one level that might be okay, but the problem is, we recognize, that it's not going to get the stain out of his suit. No matter how much Len likes me, it will never get Starbucks stain or smell out of that suit. Somebody has to pay for it. Somebody has to pay for the stain to be removed, for it to be cleaned. What if I just didn't say anything, I just didn't worry about it? What would that do to our relationship if I didn't say I was sorry, though saying sorry doesn't remove the stain, either. It would hurt the relationship; we wouldn't be 'at one.' Now, thankfully, in a very small, tangible way he demonstrated the gospel to me. I offered to pay for it to be cleaned, and in both situations he paid for it, but promised he would get me back in some way. But what you learn is, in everyday exchanges among human beings, the payment has to fit the debt.

And here is the issue at the heart of atonement: we can't just simply say to God, I'm sorry. Even though God is full of love, saying we are sorry might fit a verbal offense, but what about when I completely turn my back on him, or I deny his existence? You see here's the problem, that what atonement does, it brings us to the heart of the human condition. Our problem isn't action. Our problem, first and foremost, is one of nature. Our very being is broken because of sin. And because of that, something has to be paid for. God is offended because he has created us in his image, and we've rejected him. We're no longer at one with him. Something has to be paid for, and simply appealing to God's love and saying I'm sorry---as if that could remove the stain---doesn't do justice to the depth of the problem of human sin. But God in his grace, here in Paul he says, Here is the solution, here is the payment, here is what will remove the stain, here is what will bring us to atonement, to oneness. It will be a once and forever sacrifice of my son, who took on a human nature in flesh and blood and died in our place, who paid the debt, whose payment fits the debt, though that debt was never his. You see, everybody wants to say that God is love, as if God just ignores sin and

doesn't bring judgment. But in fact the Bible tells us it's just the opposite. No. Love is most amazing when it's in the face of that which is unlovable. God in his love is all the more loving because he sees who we are and pays it for us. That is love. He does not ignore it. He paid for it. That idea of redemption through his blood is what that is---atonement.

But forgiveness of sins, he tells us, is the other benefit. The idea of the forgiveness of sins means this: that if you are at one with God through Jesus Christ, you believe and trust and depend on what has been said by Jesus Christ, you were brought into that relationship with God---therefore forgiveness is yours for past, present, and future sin. The question is do we really believe that? There are some here this morning who fall off on the side of being self-loathers. You can't imagine, yet again, that God actually loves you and pierces the darkness of your own self-hatred and your own doubt in regard to the power of grace. You need to know the message to you is forgiveness. You will never ever ever be able to loathe yourself enough to prove to God enough that you will earn even one drop of grace. The way to Christ is never self-loathing, which really is just a form of false pride, because the one who hates self says, I and my sin is too great to be forgiven. Fundamentally it's a denial of what Christ has done on the cross. The message is to you: forgiveness.

But on the other side there are those here this morning who have a very hard time acknowledging just how deep is your need. Atonement doesn't just show us how there's nothing we can do to earn the grace, atonement also tells us of the depth, the depth. And God knows all of it. Even though everybody around you right now may think you're perfectly handsome or beautiful or successful or nice, but at your heart, in your very nature, is a brokenness that can never be mended. Only when you are able to finally come to a place to acknowledge your desperation will you be able to begin to experience the depth of grace. To experience God's grace means you see that your debt has been paid and he offers you forgiveness.

There's another thing. Not only do we see that the benefits of atonement and forgiveness come as a result [of redemption], according to God's grace, we also need to see what's underneath it all, the extent of that grace. Look back at the phrase. In English it's quite an odd phrase. It says, In him we have redemption through his blood, forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace. Now the way that works in English is not the same way that it works in Greek. Because it almost makes it sound as though God is up in heaven with a large bank of grace, and out of the riches of that bank of grace he gives you grace as you need it. But that is not what is meant. In fact, some people actually think, or may be tempted to think that somehow within that bank of grace you have a safe deposit box somewhere in there with your name on it, and you might be afraid that if you go to God yet again, you're going to dry up the grace in your account. But you see, what the English is really trying to point to, is not that God forgives and gives us atonement through his son out of riches of his grace, it is to the extent of grace. Meaning what he's trying to say to us is the extent of God's grace is greater than all our sin. If Christ has paid the debt, then his grace is the extension and the pattern, and that is much bigger than debt, greater than all our sin, and is immeasurable, inexhaustible, indelible, incredible

Are you leaning on that grace this morning? I was confronted with this question this week. As I was reading I came across a passage from an author, Jared Wilson, who challenges us in this way. He says, how are you trying to justify yourself, which is just another way of saying how are you trying to make atonement? In other words, how are you trying to be accepted before other people, how are you trying to make yourself acceptable before God, how you trying to justify yourself? And he says this, he says, are you trying to justify yourself and feel good because of how many people re-tweeted something or liked something on your social network? Is it because of your working for this sense of a pat on the back, saying, good job? Is it your kids' grades or success? Is it the size of your house? Is it your reputation? How are you trying to justify yourself? As I read those words, he then follows it with this. He says, if you're doing this, you are playing with sand, you're chasing after the wind. Because if

we can look out away from ourselves and up to the right hand of the Father where our righteousness sits, firmly fixed, eternal---there is your justification, perfect and big, bigger than you, better than you, but bled and bought for you, birthed in you, yours irrevocably sealed, and guaranteed through both your successes and your failures, through the pats on the back or the knives in your back---there is your justification, there in Christ. And because in him there is no shadow of turning, you are utterly, totally, undeniably justified. You are free. To experience the grace of Christ is to know that freedom. And we want you to know that freedom. Paul tells us this, not for a head trip, but for a heart transformation.

But he doesn't stop there. He continues to unpack the beauty. He says not only has God given us these benefits according to his grace, he has also given us something *According to His Wisdom and Pleasure*. What is it that he gives according to his wisdom and pleasure? He gives us revelation. Notice what he says, verses 8-9. He says that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding, and he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ. What he is saying, is that according to God's wisdom, first, God has revealed a mystery. The way it reads in the English---and again it's sort of cumbersome---it makes it sound like the mystery of his will. But the way it works out is this: it was God's will to reveal the mystery. What was the mystery? The mystery had only been shown to us in signs and shadows and things in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament we had offerings of sacrifice. In the Old Testament we had promises given to Abraham, David, taking Israel out of Egypt, giving them the promised land. All of those things happened historically, but they were pointing to something which was greater than themselves. The mystery of what God was doing and why he was doing it wasn't fully laid bare until the New Testament, until the new covenant was made known through Jesus Christ. You see the revelation, the will of God was to reveal the mystery of what all he had been doing before the foundation of the world. That he knew us: every word, every thought, every motivation. And it was his decision before all time, according to his will---though it still remains a mystery to some degree---what he has revealed to us is his plan of redemption.

This is what the writer of Hebrews is getting at in Hebrews chapter 1, verse 1 and following, when he says, God spoke to us in the past through prophets, but now he has spoken to us through his son, who is the exact representation of his glory. Here's the amazing thing. God has revealed it to us this morning. There is no mystery of what God is doing. He's redeeming, he's giving grace, he's pouring out his love. He's giving that revelation to you this morning. Therefore, what an amazing privilege we have. Because it tells us something about who God is. Think about it for just a moment. Take any two of us. If we are witnesses to some event---we're standing next to each other, we're witnesses to the very same event, and then ten minutes later we're interviewed---both of us standing next to each other---and we're asked to re-tell what we saw. Inevitably each person is going to tell what they saw differently. Why? Because how we tell stories comes up out of who we are. We tell stories... If you were to share your history about how you grew up, and then you would ask your parents how you grew up, inevitably there would be different emphases. Why? Because we tell stories from who we are. In other words, God's revelation, what he has done, shows us something about who he is. Think about it. God has given to finite creatures---human beings who have said, I don't want you, I rebel against you, I don't need your grace, I'm doing quite well, thank you very much---he's given to us an exceedingly eternal and infinite message. And that gives us great privilege.

But notice it will never be because of us that we have the privilege. Let me illustrate it this way. I used to write restaurant reviews, although poorly, for my college newspaper, so I've always enjoyed restaurant reviews. Occasionally I find myself reading some random review somewhere, about some restaurant I've never been to---I don't know, I'm a weirdo, so there you go. So this last week I did just that. And I was reading---this happened to be a fairly well-known food critic---and as it turned out he was going to a restaurant that was celebrating twenty years. Big deal. Huge deal. Great restaurant. Amazing. Cool. Well, it turned out that one of his very close colleagues, who is less well-known, was

going to the same restaurant on the same night. Their reservations were only fifteen minutes apart. So they said, okay, let's catch up afterward and let's compare notes. Call me tomorrow. So they did. And then he wrote the review. It wasn't a whole review, it was just a portion of what he noticed. One food critic: very well known. The other food critic: less so. Here's the story. He says our meals were virtually identical, but our experiences were not. The kitchen sent out two courses for my table. He only got one. A few remaining sips of my wine, which was ordered by the glass, were topped off. His glass sat empty at times while he waited to be offered another. We both ate extraordinary---I can't even mention what this is, because I don't understand it---fried lollipops of frog legs on a stick (I don't know what kind of food that is, but it's beside the point). They were both offered these extraordinary things, but only one of them, the well-known critic, was offered a napkin-covered bowl of rosemary and lemon scented water for rinsing one's fingers. My server was solicitous---was this course or that course or that course to your liking? Was the pacing of the meal satisfactory? Can we interest you in our cheese course? Would you like an espresso with dessert or after dessert? Finally, as I neared the revolving door to the city street, the maître d simply asked, can we help you with a cab tonight? My colleague wasn't asked any of those questions, though he still felt well-served. Yet we could not help but fault the restaurant, because in many ways it was turning its best face only toward the known and away from those who are less known.

Whether you are poor or rich, male or female, you can read or you can't, it has absolutely nothing to do with you or me. God has revealed this mystery to our children and to us as adults and every one in between. Therefore this revelation comes according to God's wisdom and his pleasure, which means the outworking result is one of humility. Because no amount of our personhood, our promise, our power---none of it ever merits receiving it. It's not about your receptivity and my not being able to receive it. It is God's work alone from beginning to end, which means what should erupt in us and in this body is a spirit of humility and not pride. Therefore, for the Christian the response should never be one of condescension to those who don't know Christ, who have never heard it or don't understand it, or who even reject it. Because why? Because God's compassion is what brought us. We should never be surprised that many in the world do not understand it or that many in the world reject it, because we, too, were once those. We have received according to God's wisdom and pleasure this exceedingly great revelation. May God work humility in us, and that that privilege would give us thanksgiving, and then turn to the world and extend it---extend the grace of Christ because it was never ours to begin with. It's a gift that has been given to us, not for us to figure out who to give it to, or whether to give it. It's what we get to do.

But then it comes to this. That not only has he given us these things according to his grace, according to his wisdom and pleasure, but also *According to His Purpose*. His purpose. What is his purpose? He tells us in verses 9 and 10. He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment---to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. It is God's purpose, that what he began when he created Adam and Eve will find its end, its *telos*, its consummated point, when Jesus Christ returns again. Now Jesus has already come when he was incarnate and took on human flesh. He died on the cross, was raised on the third day. And when Christ came, the kingdom of God on earth had already dawned, but the full kingdom has not been revealed, which is why Jesus instructs all Christians to pray, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven---because things on earth are to be patterned after heaven, but they are not yet. What is begun will find its consummated point in Christ's return. But until then God is about working things to that end. And here's the crazy part. He doesn't do it abstractly, he doesn't do it apart from us, he doesn't do it apart from his church.

God's wisdom which to man seems like foolishness, is not only that Christ has died on the cross that we might have life, but it is also that he would use the likes of us as the means through which the grace of Christ is extended. I stand before you, because someone told someone, told somebody else

who told me about my need for Jesus Christ. And now I, and if you are a Christian, it's not an 'if' statement---if you are a Christian you are a part of the chain of what God is doing human to human to human, to bring things to a consummated point. And as we do the work of extending God's grace in word and in deed, whether it be through serving at Route 1 ministry, going to Helping Up Mission in Baltimore, whether it's sending missionaries around the world, whether it's being in a prayer ministry or a Bible study, whether it begins in your home or your neighborhood or your workplace, God cares most about building his kingdom, and he wants to do it through you, his church. Because why? Because one day Jesus Christ will be before all the earth revealed as the King over the entire kingdom, and every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And what God is doing in the world is not just despite you, God desires to use you. He wants to use this church as a small part of his universal church to make things on earth as they are in heaven, because God is a redeeming God, and he means to do it through us.

And that is the Lord that we worship. We will do it as individuals, we will do it as a body, we will do it in various ways, but we never have the option of saying no. It's what we get to do. Because the Lord desires that when on that day a kingdom of heaven and of earth will be one under one King, the Lord desires for us to know---and I close with the words of a famous writer who passed this last week, who came to know Christ and became a wonderful writer. His name is Robert Farrar Capon, he wrote many wonderful Christian books, and he says this word as he looks out to when Christ will be the King and he says this: And when we rise at the last day, the only grip in which our lives will be held will be the reconciling grip of Jesus Christ resurrected. He will hold our lives---mended, clean, and pressed in his hand---and he will show them to the Father, and his Father, seeing the only real you or me there is to see, will say, "Wonderful. Just what I had in mind." And he will say over the Word's new creation of us at the last day exactly what he said over the Word's first creation of us on the sixth day: "Very good."

The Lord is on the move. May the Lord renew us to be a people who experience and extend the grace that is greater. Let's pray. Equip us, oh Lord, with this calling and your Spirit and your Word, and may you enable us to more deeply and really experience grace. But make us a people for the world to extend it where ever you call us for your glory. Not to us, oh Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.