

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Date: June 29, 2025, Week 1 of 3 on Ephesians

Text: Ephesians 1:1-14

Title: What is Grace?

Focus: Jesus doesn't define the word *grace*, nor does he use it in the gospels. Though grace is a theme word in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he doesn't define it either. The sermon will demonstrate how the grace which Paul celebrates in this letter is a gift of God which offers healing to broken people and assures us we belong to a loving God.

Epistle Reading Ephesians 1:1-14

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

What is Grace?

More than once in recent weeks, I have asked you for descriptive words for God:¹

- What adjectives do you use for God:
 - Holy, Power/Powerful, might/nighty, strength/strong, wise, Love/loving
- Nouns or names or titles for God: (God is Creator.)
- On Pentecost Sunday, I asked a similar question: What images do you have of God the Spirit:
 - From that week's reading from John, we talked about the Spirit as advocate, comforter, helper, paraclete, and one who walks alongside.

¹ See April 27 sermon.

- The images from that week's reading from Acts were very different from violent, rushing wind or tongues of fire.

Of course, there isn't one way and only one way to think of God or imagine or picture God. There are multiple images or descriptive words for God in scripture. And in our own reflective imagination, we can hold a variety of different images of who God is, which affect how we relate to God.

Growing Up Fearing God

What's your primary image of God? Is God gracious? Is God a God of grace?

A friend of mine [Elizabeth from CREDO] told me about the church and family in which she grew up. What she told me about how she was taught to think of God struck me/stuck with me because it is so different from how she views God now in adulthood.

As she learned from her home church and as was reinforced by her family, God was clearly not One who was gracious. God's job seemed to be to keep and enforce strict rules. God was a god to be feared. That fear was meant to keep you in line. Your job was to follow the rules.

While she didn't say exactly what that childhood picture of God was, it sounded like an over-eager traffic cop charged with meeting a quota of issuing tickets. God is just waiting for someone to break a rule. God sounded harsh, like driving 2 miles over the speed limit would get lights and sirens blaring with the cop delighting in pulling someone over. God sounded like not just someone waiting to enforce rules/laws, but one who delighted in it and perhaps even delighted in being harsh. As though God *wants* you to mess up/sin, so that God can exact that punishment.

What effect would that have if your only (or dominant) picture of God is like that? You would be focused on your own sin, shortcomings, feelings of unworthiness. You would likely struggle with feelings of guilt and shame. You'd continually fret that you "weren't good enough."

Her family experience reinforced the view of God as one to be feared. Her family relationships were also centered around power and control.² Within this distorted environment, she experienced feelings of shame and blame.

A New Picture of God Emerges

So, what is God like? How might we describe God?

In these conversations in which we have talked about how we think of God and what descriptive words we use for God, did we say that **God is gracious**? How do you picture God? Is God a god of grace?

² She was abused by members of her family.

What is grace? Jesus isn't recorded in the gospels as talking about grace. He doesn't define it.

Grace is a theme word in this passage from the opening chapter in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians and undergirds the whole letter and yet he doesn't define it, either.

From her childhood church and as reinforced by her family, my friend was raised to view God as a harsh traffic cop eager to pull you over for a questionable infraction. She had to work through this in the most direct and practical way. If she did not or had not addressed that, then she would continue to see God as a cop gone bad—capriciously or putatively enforcing rules not for the sake of justice or for the well-being of individuals or communities, but for twisted personal gain or to observe the suffering of others.

Over time, she made her way to a new church denomination in which she encountered a portrayal of God which was very different from which she had known growing up.

Is God gracious? Is that how you see God? What does grace mean and what does it do or what is its impact?

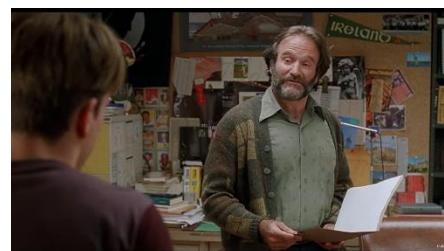
In a group Bible study resource called *“Receiving Grace: A study of Ephesians,”* writer, spiritual director, and Episcopal priest Heidi Haverkamp recognizes that it is hard to define grace. She writes,

- “Grace is a living thing. Perhaps we can only define or understand it when we see it happening in our own lives or the lives of people close to us” (p. 18 of study).

Experiencing Grace

Does that explanation make sense to you? *Grace* is a big word which is hard to describe or define, but maybe you know it when you see it in your own life or in the life of a close family member or friend. There is a scene of remarkable grace in the 1997 movie *Good Will Hunting*.

- **Matt Damon plays Will Hunting.** Will is brilliant. He is a genius with an unmatched ability to solve the most complex math equations. But he lives a spotty, unfulfilled life, toiling at menial jobs that don't tap into his remarkable gifts.
- He is unable to develop any close relationships except for a handful of childhood friends who are fiercely loyal to him.
- He continually engages in self-sabotaging and destructive behavior. He puts up a brusque or abrasive exterior as a way of pushing others away from him before they can grow close so that he doesn't have to experience rejection.



- He gets into trouble for petty crime and violent outbursts.
- As the storyline develops, we discover that he has experienced horrific physical abuse within his birth family.

Robin Williams plays psychologist Sean Maguire, to whom Will is assigned as his therapist in a plea bargain in another court case. As the therapeutic relationship develops, Sean sees through Will's bravado and is persistent enough to stick with him to begin to develop some trust.

- In this pivotal scene, Sean follows his instinct and breaks a rule of therapy by divulging that he, too, was abused by his father. This acknowledgement of a shared experience prompts Will to open the door of trust a little bit more and he begins to talk about what it was like.
- **Sean to Will: "It's not your fault."**
 - Will brushes him off, minimizing the impact of the pain.
- Sean persists: "It's not your fault."
 - "I know," Will says, but in a casual way, again downplaying it.
- "It's not your fault."
 - Will becomes agitated, "Don't mess with me, Sean. Don't mess with me; not you."
 - What he means is that he doesn't want to be emotionally jerked around.
 - "Don't mess with me. Not you, Sean." Because you're the only one I trust even a little and you better not be jerking me around."
- *Display the next photo.*

- **"It's not your fault."**
 - Sean says it again. Ultimately, Sean has said it 10 times.
 - By his persistence, Sean has broken through, and Will, sobbing, initiates a deep embrace, allowing Sean's gracious reassurance to wash over him, hearing and absorbing this healing good news that this trauma which he has experienced is not his fault, that he has done nothing to deserve it.
 - Maybe, for the first time, through this trust developed with Sean, he allows himself to believe that this might be true.
 - You did nothing to deserve this.
 - You are worthy of being loved.
 - You are set free to know that you are loved and so that you might love others.



The next pivotal scene, leading to resolution, is Sean at his mailbox, where he discovers a note left by Will.

- *Display the final slide with 2 photos: Sean at the mailbox and Will's car on the highway.*

Earlier in his office, Sean told Will the story of how he met his wife. Sean and Will are both diehard Red Sox fans (the story is set in Boston) and Sean tells Will how he, as a young man, along with some buddies, slept out overnight to get tickets to a Red Sox playoff game.



They're having a beer in a neighborhood bar before the game when Sean sees the woman who would become his wife.

It's a life-changing moment for Sean, and he knows it. He slides his game ticket across the table to his buddies, telling them to go on without him.

Will is incredulous that Sean would give up a once-in-a-lifetime moment as a Sox fan. Sean speaks tenderly of his wife, now deceased after battling cancer for many years. Having loved her so deeply, he says he has no regret despite the struggle of walking with her through cancer and the present pain of loss and loneliness.

- His line to his buddies in the bar that night explaining why he couldn't go with them to the game was, "I had to go see about a girl."

Now in the present, with Sean at the mailbox, he opens Will's note to read, "Thanks, Sean. I had to go see about a girl," which means he's going to go see Skylar, the one whom he had earlier pushed away. He now realizes he wants to live without regret. He wants to see if there is a future with Skylar in the same way Sean told his buddies to go to the Sox game without him.

- "Son of a gun," Sean says wistfully at the mailbox. "The guy stole my line," as you see Will's car heading west to go see Skylar in California.

Our Story of Judgement

We don't have to have experienced abuse or other "Big T" trauma to doubt ourselves with harsh judgement. "You're not enough. You're not good enough" are messages we tell ourselves. We judge people around us. We assume other people are

judging us. We judge ourselves. These messages lead us to imagine God's judgement and criticism more easily than we can imagine God's grace.³

What is grace?

For Will, it is the healing word and actions of Sean.

- Grace is Sean's persistence, overcoming Will's attempts to push him away.
- Grace is the trust that they develop.
- Grace is Will hearing, deeply hearing and acknowledging, that the trauma that he repeatedly experienced is not his fault.
 - "It's not your fault."
- Grace brings him healing and the freedom to be vulnerable and to find hope and fulfillment.

In this first chapter of Ephesians and throughout the letter, Paul celebrates the grace of God.

- Grace is knowing that you are loved no matter what and that you belong.
- A catechism asks,⁴

Question 1. Who are you?

I am a child of God.

Question 2. What does it mean to be a child of God?

That I belong to God, who loves me.

Question 3. What makes you a child of God?

Grace -- God's free gift of love that I do not deserve and cannot earn.

Paul's words of grace from Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. . ." (Ephesians 2:8) are like Sean telling Will, "It's not your fault."

Thanks be to God that God is not an over-eager cop or a corrupt judge, but is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

³ See Heidi Haverkamp, *Receiving Grace: A Study of Ephesians*, p. 19.

⁴ Questions 1 – 3 in *Belonging to God: A First Catechism*. Question 4. Approved by the 210th General Assembly (1998) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).