

**AMAZING GRACE – By Robert Jones**

Delivered Sunday, June 23, 2019

**Gospel Reading****The Parable of the Lost Son - Luke 15:11-32 New International Version**

<sup>11</sup> Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

<sup>13</sup> "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

<sup>21</sup> "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

<sup>22</sup> "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

<sup>28</sup> "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I

could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!

<sup>31</sup> “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

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[To be read:] “Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.

‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; ‘tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures; he will my shield and portion be, as long as life endures.

Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail, and mortal life shall cease, I shall possess, within the veil, a life of joy and peace.

When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’d first begun.”

These familiar words express the topic I want to talk about today. A few years ago when I was searching for a topic for a Sunday morning talk, Patricia Adams suggested I talk about Grace. The idea didn’t really sizzle. Then, a few weeks ago, I heard the song, “Amazing Grace,” again, paid closer attention to its words, got curious, took a look at what people have to say about it, started thinking about what I might have to say about it, and here we are. So Patricia, it’s too late to change your mind; you’re stuck with me.

The term “grace” occurs a lot in the New Testament; it’s a translation of the Greek term “Charis.” “Charis,” or “grace,” is actually used there in various related senses, but there is a core sense, often identified as Divine Grace. For a definition of Divine Grace, I’ll quote from -- you

guessed it -- Wikipedia (which appears to have taken it from the OED): it is "the free and unmerited favour of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowing of blessings. It is God's gift of salvation granted to sinners for their salvation." The Wikipedia note goes on: " Common Christian teaching is that grace is unmerited mercy (favor) that God gave to humanity by sending his son to die on a cross, thus delivering eternal salvation.... Many Christians believe that the grace of God is accessed simply as an act of faith."

The term is used in various other senses related to this one, but this captures the core notion, I think.

A.N. Wilson, whose book "Jesus – A Life" I have read with much profit, writes that a key underlying idea here is that "God's forgiveness is not dependent on human virtue at all, but rather on the free outpouring of divine love for the human race, regardless of their moral rectitude or turpitude." (p.33) He, along with most writers I've consulted, thinks that this is largely St. Paul's contribution. True, we can find hints of it in Jesus's teaching, such as today's parable of the prodigal son, but these hints, and other statements by Jesus affirming God's love, are only suggestions and do not reflect the full doctrine of Divine Grace. It is in the writings of Paul that we see the full doctrine.

It appears to have been more or less an invention of Paul's; he makes clear in his letter to the Galatians that he did not hear the Gospel he preaches, including presumably the doctrine of Divine Grace, from any of Jesus's friends. "It was not from any human being that I received it, but it came to me through a revelation of Jesus Christ." Galatians 1:12. So Paul received the doctrine of Divine Grace by revelation.

Here is a plain statement of Paul's about grace: "... by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9.

So we access God's grace by having faith; not by doing anything but simply by having faith. You don't have to perform any good works to win God's grace. (Incidentally, though, writers on this topic make it clear, however, that if one has faith, he or she will naturally go about doing good. But they don't earn grace by doing so.)

Still, it's not strictly true, is it, that God grants his grace with no conditions: the grantee must have faith. Suppose he doesn't have faith? Suppose his faith is shaken. Is he out of the running? Is it really the case that God's grace is a full outpouring of love regardless of the person's virtue? Or does it begin to look as if God's grace is a reward for faith?

I'm reminded of the story of, um, "Sam," who fell upon hard times. In despair one night he prayed, "Lord, sorry to bother you, but I've fallen on hard times. Because I was sick for so long, my mortgage payments are way overdue, I'm gonna lose my car unless I catch up on those payments, and there's a ton of other problems that are just catching up with me. Could you, well, help me out by letting me win the lottery? I know you could do it. Please help me!" Next night, "Lord, guess I didn't win the lottery. Things are getting really bleak. They're gonna foreclose on my house. Please, help me win the lottery, it's my only chance!" Nothing. Next night, same prayer. Suddenly, a voice, "Sam, about this lottery thing. I'll be glad to help, but on one condition." "What's that?" "Sam, buy a ticket!"

Shouldn't we say that to receive God's Grace you have to have a ticket? The ticket of faith.

I'm reminded of the French philosopher Blaise Pascal, who propounded what's come to be known as Pascal's Wager. Pascal reasoned that the best bet was to believe in God. Suppose, he thought, you do not believe in God and the Bible turns out to be false. No great loss. But if the Bible turns out to be true while you disbelieve, you are, it might be said, in deep yogurt; eternal damnation awaits you. If, on the other hand, you do believe in God but the Bible is false, no great loss. You are simply disappointed. But if you believe in God and the Bible is true, then you have hit the jackpot – eternal life. So if you do not believe in God, you run the risk of eternal damnation, whereas if you do believe in God, you may gain a great reward. So you should believe in God.

The problem, of course, is that belief in God is not something you can gain by clicking an icon on your screen. You cannot believe in God – i.e., have faith -- - simply by deciding to have it. Faith, for many, is not easily won, and not easily kept, certainly not simply by deciding that it is in your interest; for such people, anyway, Paul's path to Divine Grace is not a cakewalk. True, one may gain faith itself by divine gift, but that is a matter that is out of our hands.

Back to Paul on Divine Grace. “[Grace] is the gift of God [he tells us]: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” Note the antipathy to salvation by doing good works. “Not of works, lest any man should boast.” So, one cannot be saved by works, such as following the Ten Commandments, helping others not because Jesus commands it but because it is the right thing to do, and so forth? Why? Because one might boast. We are reminded of Jesus's parable of the pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18: 9-14:

<sup>9</sup>To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:

<sup>10</sup> “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

<sup>13</sup> “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

<sup>14</sup> “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

So the Pharisee loses out simply because he “exalted” himself. Let’s not place too much weight here on the parable. Do not exalt yourself. Fine. Remember that you have faults as well. But does that mean that you cannot be saved by doing good works because you might boast? What if the do-gooder does not “boast,” but goes about life humbly and berates himself because he can’t do more for others? On the other hand, suppose the saved person boasts about being saved? Not because of any achievement but in simple pride at having been picked by God through no virtue of his own. What then?

Did Jesus think that one is saved by grace, but not by works? He certainly did not look down on the Jewish moral laws that were – remember – given by God:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5: 17.

True, he disdained a rigid reading of Jewish law: “And he said unto [the pharisees], The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” Mark 2:27. But I do not see Jesus as preaching that one cannot be saved, as “a gift of God,” by good works. But enough on that

topic. There is apparently much disagreement about faith versus good works, and I boast of no expertise in such matters.

I've had some things to say about the doctrine of Divine Grace. I want to close with a good word for the brother of the prodigal son. You'll recall that he – let's call him the Other Son – was bent out of shape at the treatment that the Prodigal Son received on his return. "Hey, Dad! I've spent all these years working on your farm and doing my duty – he spends all your money on parties and because he says he's sorry you give him a feast with the fattened calf when you never even gave me a scrawny goat!" Well, maybe the Other Son went a bit too far. Maybe it would have been classier to welcome his brother and keep his resentment to himself. That said, I suggest that the close of the parable gives us a better insight into God's attitude toward the people that the two brothers represent. For the father said to the Other Brother "My son,...you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." What this tells me is that God loves both of us, not one to the exclusion of the other. So there may be room in heaven after all for the person who reads the Bible, is struck by the profound grandeur of Jesus's moral teaching and sets out to lead a life reflecting it, mindful that he or she is certain to fall short but determined to do his or her best, or who follows a set of moral ideals, not because of their author but because they seem simply the right way to live, or who responds to the example of a morally committed person closer to home. Anyway, who knows? Maybe we will, some day.