

God's Grace Overflows  
In Paul's Life  
In Our Lives

*<sup>12</sup>I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. <sup>13</sup>Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. <sup>14</sup>The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. <sup>16</sup>But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. <sup>17</sup>Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

A couple of weeks ago, I had the opportunity to attend the call service at Wisconsin Lutheran seminary. I was there waiting to meet the young man who would be assigned to serve as Mount Olive's next pastor. But as I sat in that service along with 42 graduates and their families, eagerly awaiting to hear where in the Lord's Kingdom they would be assigned to serve, I realized that exactly 40 years earlier, that was me sitting in that same auditorium, waiting to find out where I would be assigned. I remember my bride to be saying something to the effect of, "Robb, I'll follow you to the end of the earth. And when the synod president said I was assigned to Houghton, Michigan, we both thought, "That may not be the end of the earth, but I'll bet we can see it from there."

As I think about that first call day, as I think about this year's graduates waiting to be assigned, I'm reminded of a question that I've been asked for numerous occasions, a question that a lot of seminary graduates will be asked as well, and the question is, "Why? Why are you a pastor? What led you to enter the public ministry?"

As I look back on 40 years of ministry, I can probably point to a number of things that had an influence on me being a pastor. Number one would be my grandmother, who always said, "Robby, you are going to be my pastor someday." (At the time, I was thinking game warden, but God had other plans.) My father had a big influence on me. Although he was not a pastor, he was very involved in the work of the church. He set an example of what Lutheran leadership looked like. Some might say that I became a pastor because I wasn't afraid of public speaking (I was the lead role in my senior class play). Others would say I liked learning foreign languages like Greek and Hebrew. (I wouldn't say I liked them; I would say I could handle them to a degree.) For a while there I thought I'd be a pastor because I didn't want to have to decide what university I would attend. (The WELS only had one worker training college, so that made it easy.) And there was a part of me that wanted to be a pastor because I selfishly thought I could be a better pastor than anyone else.

But you want to know the real reason I'm a pastor? There's only one reason. And it's Grace. It's God's undeserved love for sinners. It's God's grace that turned a miserable, broken, clay pot of a man into messenger bringing the good news of God's love for sinners to people like

you and me. In that sense, I'm not all that different from a man named Paul. In our text for a day, the Apostle Paul speaks about the impact that God's grace had on his life. It was by grace that God called him to faith in Jesus Christ. It was by grace that God transformed him from being the greatest persecutor of the church to being the greatest defender of the church. And it is by grace that God has done, and continues to do, similar things for you and me today. You might say that when it comes to God's undeserved love for sinners, the fact is, (and this is our theme for day):

### God's Grace Overflows

Today, we'll see that God's grace overflowed:

In Paul's Life. And it overflows

In Our Lives

Now, maybe we should begin by defining what we mean by "grace." These days that term is used in a lot of different ways. For example, grace might be what the professional ice skater displays as she effortlessly glides across the ice. Grace might be the three-day period that your insurance company offers you when you are late paying your premium. And grace might be the prayer that you say before digging into the Thanksgiving turkey. But when it comes to a biblical definition of grace, which in Greek is the word *Xaris*, what is grace? We say that grace is...what? God's undeserved love. Yes, Grace is the love, the favor, that God shows us even when we don't deserve it. Grace is the love that we cannot earn.

In fact, you might say that grace is defined not so much by what it is or what it does, but rather, to whom it is shown. For example, if I tip the waiter who is prompt, courteous, and gets my order exactly right, that's not really a gift of grace. He earned that gift. But if the waiter belches in my face, spills water down my back, and never brings me what I ordered, and I still give him \$5, that's grace. Well, so it is with how God deals with us. You might say that the worst we are, the greater is God's grace. Or as Paul once wrote to the Romans, "*Where sin increased, grace increased all the more. (Romans 5:20)*". Well, nowhere is that more evident than in the life of Paul. St. Paul highlights how amazing God's grace is by reminding his readers the kind of person God showed that grace to. Paul writes, *I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man*. Paul is referring to that time in his life when he was going house to house throwing Christians in jail. He was casting his vote to put them to death. He was seeing to it that Stephen was stoned to death. In other words, Paul was not merely a little spiritually off track. He was trying to single-handedly destroy the Christian church.

And yet in spite of that, how did God deal with this man? Paul tells us. *Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy. Why? because I acted in ignorance and unbelief*. Now, don't misunderstand. Paul is not saying that his behavior was somehow accusable because he just didn't know any better. No, he's saying that in spite of the fact that he was a hard-headed unbeliever, God still had mercy on him. God still called him to faith. God still put him to work for the good of his kingdom—in spite of the kind of person Paul had been in his past.

Tell me, can you relate? As you think back on an earlier version of yourself, are there some things that you're not all that proud of? Behaviors that were totally opposed to God's will for your life? Things that, if God judged you on the basis of your behavior, would have certainly disqualified us from any love that God might want to show you? I sure can. We all have some skeletons in our closets. We all have incidents that we'd like to forget. I mean, even future pastors and teachers. I mean, to think that when I was in college, I broke the leaf springs on my Pinto wagon because I was hauling around too many half barrels of beer in the back of the car.

Or how many classes I slept through because I'd stay up way too late the night before.

And yet, in spite of my past behavior, what did God do? He did for me the same thing he did for Paul. He showed me mercy. just like the apostle Paul, God showed mercy to me. And just like with the apostle Paul, God's mercy was not doled out, a little bit at a time. It wasn't that God distributed his grace with an eye dropper. No, how does Paul put it? *The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly.* The Greek word there is used for a pitcher that is filled to the brim and is running over, or a river that is flowing over its banks. Paul is saying that there is an endless supply of God's grace. It's like a well that can never grow dry.

And exactly what did God's grace do for Paul? First, grace worked saving faith in Saul's heart. When Jesus appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, the Spirit led him to see and believe Jesus for who we really is, namely, that crucified and now resurrected Lord. But God's grace not only made Paul a believer. It also made him an apostle. Isn't that right? Here in our text, Paul acknowledges that he didn't apply for the position. It's not like he was more qualified than anyone else, or that he was this fervent, lifelong follower of Jesus. No, actually, Paul's position as an apostle to the gentiles was not the result of anything that Paul did. Rather, it was all God's doing. How does Paul put it here in our text? *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service.* Again, it was not that Paul was taking credit for being so trustworthy, so faithful to the Lord. No rather, he was marveling that God would consider him to be trustworthy, in spite of all his past shortcomings. That's simply an expression of God's grace.

And finally, why would God choose to show such grace to a violent persecutor like Paul? Well, Paul tells us here in our text when he says, *For that very reason I was shown mercy, so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.* Do you hear what Paul is saying there? He's saying that God, in effect, made Paul the ultimate poster boy for God's grace. He wanted people down through the centuries to look at Paul's life and say, "Wow, if God could show mercy to an avowed enemy like Saul, if God could turn one of the most renowned persecutors of the church into one of the world's most famous apostles, maybe there's hope that God would have mercy on me, too."

Kind of reminds me of the before and after pictures to see on TV or as you're scrolling through your media feed. I don't know, am I the only one who gets these ads for chair yoga where you've got this picture of a scrawny guy with noodle arms and then 60 or 90 days later, he's got six pack abs and arms made of steel? And you're thinking, "Maybe that could be me. What workout routine is he using?"

But of course, that kind of transformation would require a whole lot of work on my part. It would be totally dependent upon what I do to make it happen. But that's not the way that God works. God doesn't say, "Once you start living right, then I'll love you." Or, "If you do this, or stop doing that, then I'll be on your side." No, what does Scripture say? *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)*

My friends, isn't that the essence of the gospel? Jesus didn't come to save the good people. He came to save sinners. In fact, here in our text Paul drives that point home. He writes, *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I in the worst.* Notice two things about that statement. First, notice that Paul doesn't speak in the past tense. He doesn't say that once upon a time he was the worst of sinners. Paul speaks in the present tense. "Of whom I am the worst." Paul is still very much aware that he has a sinful nature that lives in constant rebellion against God. Paul knows that sin

is not only something that he did in the past. It's a condition he was born with and still displays on a daily basis. Which is why the first words of that statement are so important. *Christ Jesus came into this the world to save sinners*. Really, every word in that statement is packed with meaning. Christ, the anointed one, the eternal son of God promised of old. Jesus, the son of Man, whose name means “he saves” He came, that is, he left his throne of glory to be born into this broken world, to live under the law in our place and offer his body on the cross, to do what? To save, that is not to just point people in the right direction, or to give them a helping hand, or to offer a little encouragement to do the best they can, but rather to rescue them from the flames of hell forever. My friends, that's what God did to show us his undeserved love. He showed it to the apostle Paul, and he still shows it to you and me today.

I don't know about you, but I know that there are plenty of things that I've done in my past that I regret. Times when I've let my sinful nature control me. Times when I turn the blind eye to what God wanted me to do. Sometimes those things happened years ago and they still haunt me. Other times they happen like yesterday and I can't believe that I am still falling into the same sins. And for every one of those sins, there's a little voice in my head that says, “You think God doesn't know what you did? You think God is going to just let that go? How can you possibly think that God loves you after what you did? You don't deserve his love.” And you know, to a certain extent, that voice is right. I don't deserve God's love. In fact, no sinner does. But that's where grace comes in. Grace is God's undeserved love for sinners like me. Grace means that there is no sin that God has not covered. There is no wound that God's grace cannot heal.

Remember Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan? Where the man on the road to Jerusalem was beaten and robbed and left for dead? And then the Good Samaritan comes along and pours oil in his wounds to reduce the pain and accelerate the healing. Now imagine that olive oil is like God's grace. And instead of a little jar of it, God has a whole ocean of it. There's like this endless supply of it. No matter how severe your injury, no matter how deep your wounds, God's grace is always more. God continues to apply it to your wounds. Whether that grace comes in the form of the pastor's absolution telling you that by the authority of Jesus himself your sins are forgiven. Or whether it comes through the washing with water and the word where God in fact has washed your sins away. Or whether it comes in the form of Jesus' very body and blood, given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of your sins—the bottom line is this:

God is not stingy with his grace. God's grace overflows. No matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter how much baggage you're carrying, in Christ, your sins are forgiven. You are alright in God's eyes. You have God's grace. And for that we join another forgiven child of God and say, *Now to the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, (to him) be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*