

Extreme Wildfire: The Gift of Grace

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I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. Ephesians 4: 1-13

Today we conclude our **Extreme Wildfire** series on the Holy Spirit. We have talked about the Spirit as advocate and encourager, one who walks with us in all of our circumstances of life, living a life of praise in that the Spirit calls us to honor God with our lips and our actions always. Today we talk about grace that comes from God. Grace as part of God's family. Grace that we are offered by God, and grace we can offer to others as a gift. And God's calling us to live a life that is worthy of the sacrifice of Jesus.

Grace is defined as "unmerited favor." Unmerited means not deserved. Like an unmerited raise. Or an unmerited reprimand by a parent when a sneaky sibling foisted their dastardly deed on your shoulders. You got the unmerited blame. **Unmerited favor** is getting what we DO NOT deserve. **Judgment** is what we deserve as part of our sinful human condition. **Grace is unmerited favor.**

That gift of grace comes from Jesus Christ stepping in on my behalf before God the Father and interceding for me personally. Jesus saying, "Jerry and everyone here deserves to be lost, but I died for them. I shed MY blood, I gave MY life for him, because I was and am, the Lamb of God. I died in their places. The debt is paid in full. My grace is sufficient so that Jerry and each of you here today, might have a life that is full of God's grace."

Unmerited grace is like the best friend you went to high school with who is now a federal judge on the judicial bench. You are guilty of a serious offense and the judge charges you for your crime, and sentences you to pay a fine of \$20,000. Your friend the judge, charges you, and sentences you with the Guilty penalty. You have no means to pay, yet the judge comes out from behind the bench, gets out his bankbook and writes a check to pay your debt. The one, who could pronounce judgment, paid the price for you in full! All you need to do is accept the gift. That is unmerited favor. That is grace. Not getting

what you deserve, instead receiving a debt paid in full, time served on your behalf, someone stepping in to take your punishment because you were the offender.

I had moved to a new appointment in June several years ago and was invited to Thanksgiving dinner with a group of people that I did not know well at the time. Funny how you can observe family dynamics when you are out of your own familiar and family settings. There was the wonderful smell of turkey and pies baking. I heard laughter, watched good-natured ribbing among the family and was exposed to several inside family jokes. And I witnessed some contentions feelings that sat well below the surface between two women, sisters in law. I never knew the germination point of their fussiness, but apparently, it had been ongoing.

They had a tiff about the way giblet gravy should be made, yet I noted that they spoke kindly to each other, most of the time. After dinner, I saw them both ask the other for forgiveness, and they reconciled. You see the church is filled with people who share the same spiritual DNA. We believe in a triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We affirm that as we speak an Affirmation of our Faith. We may not share the same family chromosomes with the person in the pew, but we share the same grace that only comes to us through Jesus Christ.

Have you ever seen a child at a birthday party who is NOT the birthday boy or girl? Sometimes they act up and act out. Sometimes they create disturbances, fussing, pushing and shoving, trying to be the center of attention, and sometimes even trying to wrestle away the gift being opened by the child who is having the birthday.

Once I was at a kid's birthday party, saw a little girl who was beside herself with anger, and envy because the party was not all about her. She was an invited guest named Megan, who in her anger pushed the birthday girl down as the birthday girl was opening a gift. "Mine! Mine! Mine! Not yours!" screamed Megan. The surprised 5-year-old birthday girl, Rebecca, stood up, and said, "It's okay Megan, you can have the baby doll."

This small child had just modeled what being grace filled is about. And she modeled it to me. Little five year old Rebecca showed empathy, compassion, and understanding. The aggressive unhappy girl Megan, did not get to keep the doll. But I learned something that day. God's grace comes to us in all forms. Ephesians mentions to us that in verse 7 "each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." Christ gave up his life to give me a gift. Not on my birthday, not on Labor Day, but Christ gave me a gift that is beyond measure, beyond material value. My birthday is in December. But my real "birthday" was when I accepted Christ. When my life changed. When I knew God as creator, Jesus as Savior, Spirit as encourage and advocate.

Our shared experience brings us together as grace filled members of the body of Christ. If you have ever been camping with friends and have been wonderfully miserable, you know what I mean. You all suffer the same smoky fire that won't start because the wood is damp. You eat the same undercooked beanie weenies and sleep on the ground on that rock under your hip. Shared experience binds us together.

MY dad was one of four brothers who had all moved to different parts of the country. I have first cousins that probably would not know me, and vice versa because our families spent little time together. I sent Christmas cards to all my cousins for many years and never heard back from them at Christmas. So I have stopped. It's not that they are angry; it's that there is no commonality or shared experience and that is necessary to make us think of ourselves as family.

We read the passage today in verse 2 and we hear words like "humility, gentleness, patience, bearing in love, making every effort to maintain unity in the Spirit in the bond of peace." Those are all behaviors that are **grace** based in love that make for unity. In any relationship that is of a deeper nature, we see humility, gentleness, patience and a sense of grace-filled forgiveness that can overlook our quirks our shortcomings. Jesus the Christ overlooks our nature. He calls us on it, challenges us to live deeply committed grace filled lives as His Followers.

Grace from the Holy Spirit in our lives is that urging and nudging that calls you to speak kindly to another, to forgive one another, to look at the angry person with eyes of compassion. Grace allows us to see Christ in the one who seems grace-less. Grace covers a multitude of shortcomings. Think about family again for a moment.

Think of an irritating behavior of someone in your family. Could it be your brother or sister, mom or dad, cousins, aunts, uncles or even spouse? Name it, but be grace filled in naming it please. We can name the faults of others quickly and completely, or at least I can. But what about me? Do I have irritating and quirky mannerisms, actions, or behaviors that bother my family? Well...?I know that I do, although I cannot recall them all just now!

Family is a cohesive unit. Full of unique personalities, and needs, history and a common heritage of things that have occurred in the past. We as Christians are all descended from and grafted into the family of God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit the advocate and comforter. We as Believers are all one in Christ. We share the same DNA, the same spiritual genes that come from God. Christ's gracious gift of eternal life was given to each of us when we just asked. Grace fills our lives with the Holy Spirit when we say; "I do" to Christ as Lord and Savior.

As Christians, we share in the communal table sacrament of communion together. We today participated as witnesses as part of the family of God in an infant baptism. We share in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in communion and we remember our baptism when others are baptized. We are gratefully given the gift of grace and mercy to live a life that is redeemed and will live in eternity with God.

The Apostle Paul in this letter to the church people in the city of Ephesus, made it clear that there should be a kinship among Jesus' followers that goes beyond just a blood relationship. Paul knew that God's desire was for each of us to become a part of this family of God. So we may not have the genes, but we have the grace. We may not have

the same looks, but we have the relationship. We may not have the same gifts, but we are part of a grace filled unified family that is Spirit driven, Spirit filled, and Spirit led.

I would like you to call out to me and to the others in the church today, a family member's name that is immediate family or distant relative, that is a bit quirky. Anybody? If you think of your extended family for instance, you can identify one or more persons whose opinions differ from your greatly. Right? Politics, sports, art, vacation spots, cars preferred. And heaven help us when it comes to our faith beliefs. But just like the first grader at their first day of school, when the kid hands the teacher a note from home that says, "The opinions expressed by this child are not necessarily those of his parents, "we need to remember that as created people, we have choices.

In a healthy family, one member may think one way but even if they disagree, they most likely come to another family member's aid when they are in need.

At his daughter's funeral, a father told the gathered congregation of family and friends, "my son in law and little girl need you in their lives now. Remain in their lives, stay connected with them for years to come."

Two years after the daughter's death, the man said, "two years later, the family is still there. So are some of the friends, some of the time." Do you hear the difference?

In most instances, friendship bonds cannot replace the bond of family. Paul the Apostle is setting goals for the followers of Jesus to be the people who are there for one another. Jesus Christ was the savior of humanity that could gather these uniquely different strangers together and shape them into a family of blood relatives.

We can't expect uniformity in the church just like we can't expect our kids to all be the same. But as faithful Spirit filled followers of Christ, we can expectantly hope that we are the people who are still there when one of us in pain or in need.

I have no brothers or sisters that I know of. I was adopted as a child and have never seen my birth mom or dad. I know little about my parents other than my mother had red hair. But Patricia and Glen, who adopted me, along with my adopted sister Jean and my sister Janet, we are a family. I look different from my sisters and parents. But they are my family. I also consider so many of you as family, as my brothers and sisters in Christ.

We embrace Christ as our brother, our savior, and God as Father/Parent /Creator, and Spirit as constant companion, encourager, and advocate. The mystery of our faith is that we are given a divine nature to live and behave as the children of God that we are. We have the genes, and we have the grace.

For each of us gathered here this morning, we are part of God's family. Descended from and grafted into a line that is focused on Jesus Christ.

No matter your family of origin, no matter how your family treated you or cared for you, or did not care for you, through the gift of grace of Christ, we are a redeemed people, a sanctified people, and a loved and forgiven people.

We belong to the family of God that is grace filled and is unified in body, purpose and Holy Spirit.

I ask this question of you today. Where will you show God's grace to another? Where will you demonstrate that you are part of God's family? Where will you extend grace to one who is desperately in need of knowing that they are loved, cared for, forgiven and can be redeemed? That is your challenge this week, to extend grace to one who needs to know Jesus Christ.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer: