

**“There but for the Grace of God, Go I”
OAK GROVE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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August 1, 2021

Ephesians 2:1-10, 4:1-7, 11-16

Let us pray for inspiration and the awareness of the Holy Spirit.

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voices but your own, so that we may hear your Word and also do it, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

2 You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

4 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and

gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until 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. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

There is a story another pastor tells about a congregation member coming into his office to register a complaint. The pastor had been preaching a sermon series on Christian clichés, those phrases that we often utter when we don't know what else to say. Much like what we have been talking about over the last few weeks. This pastor had also preached five or six weeks on common phrases that we might mistakenly assume are in the bible because we hear them so frequently. The congregation member came into his pastor's office very unhappy, and he said to the pastor, "I had a friend call last night whose life is falling apart. I wanted to comfort her. I wanted to say, 'Everything happens for a reason', 'God won't give you more than you can handle,' But I couldn't because you've taken away all of my clichés. So, I just

listened and thought to myself, ‘Well, there but for the grace of God go I.’”

Over the last several weeks we have discussed phrases like, “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” and “judge not, lest you be judged.” We talked about the fact that many of these phrases are not in the bible at all, while others, like “judge not,” are in the bible, but are often misunderstood or misappropriated from their context. The phrase, “there but for the grace of God go I,” is one of those phrases not in the bible, although it is different than some of these other phrases or clichés.

Whereas we often hear some of these familiar clichés in times of trouble when the person saying the phrase is trying to say something in support or encouragement to a person going through difficulty, the phrase, “there but for the grace of God go I,” is different. It is a more self-centered phrase, and that is what, I believe makes it a difficult phrase, and one we should shy away from using regularly.

When we speak a word of encouragement, no matter how ill-advised or clichéd, our attempt is to be focused on caring for another person. It is meant to comfort someone after a job loss, or bad medical result, or to soften the blow of grief after a loss. It recognizes that the other person is hurting and is an attempt to provide comfort and care. But when we hear, “There but for the grace of God go I,” it is typically in terms of comparison, when we see someone going through something difficult, and then we make reference to ourselves, in essence, giving thanks to God’s grace that we have not suffered the same fate. It is a sentiment that is focused on our own good fortune, but only in so much as it compares our good circumstance over against someone else’s suffering or pain.

About a week ago, I had a memory pop up in my Facebook feed. For those of you who are not on Facebook, the memory function is when

Facebook automatically shows you something you posted a year or two, or even several years ago. The memory that popped up was this from late July 2016. I made a comment about the speech that Michelle Obama, the former first lady, made in front of the Democratic National Convention. I thought it was a well-crafted and heart-felt speech. It was inspirational. She spoke about her own life experience and the attributes she wanted in a future president, and then she said, “And we give back, even when we are struggling ourselves, because we know that there is always someone worse off, and there but for the grace of God go I.” And frankly, I was so frustrated by her use of the phrase that I really didn’t hear the rest of the speech.

My frustration, as I have said, with “there but for the grace of God go I,” is it sets up a stratification and distance between us and another person. In fact, I think it sets up a potential for being judgmental about the circumstances of another, and suggests for some reason unknown to us, that the person has done something to fall out of God’s grace. Or that God is arbitrary in handing out grace, so that if God’s grace is taken away by God, we would then suffer, so we better thank God that we are not like the other person. I don’t think people intentionally mean to say this, that God withholds grace from some people, that God picks and chooses who gets grace and who doesn’t. That we are where we are in fortunate circumstances because God gave us a measure of grace but took it away from someone else, I don’t think people mean to say this when they utter, “there but for the grace of God go I,” but it is difficult not to hear that, even if it is unintentional. “There but for the grace of God go I” seems to say that “God is ultimately and directly responsible for whether our days end in blessed normality or incomprehensible tragedy.”

Grace is a core aspect to Christian theology and understanding. The word *grace* has many different meanings and layers of meanings. It can

be translated as words like favor, mercy, pity, steadfastness, forgiveness, acceptance, love. God's grace is ultimately made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ – in his life, death, and resurrection. Grace is God's desire and willingness to love, accept, and forgive us always and in every circumstance. Grace is given to us, not as a situational reward, not because of anything we do, but rather, as a gift freely given. In Ephesians, Paul says, it is by grace that we have “been saved through faith,” and that is not our own doing; rather, “it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

Grace gives us the ability to move toward the good and toward the other. It is what motivates us to be a part of God's reconciling and redemptive work in the world. Grace is the nudge away from selfishness and into concern for the other. “Paul makes this clear when he talks about his own experience of grace. Paul teaches that the Christian life begins with grace and continues as grace works within us, shaping our lives. Everything good thing in his life, Paul says, comes from this work of grace within him. Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul says that he was last in, invited by Jesus himself, untimely in his conversation, undeserving of God's mercy and grace, unfit to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church of God. Then he says this. “But by the grace of God I am what I am....” (1 Corinthians 15:10a) It sounds a little bit like, “There, but for the grace of God go I, doesn't it? But he isn't comparing himself to someone else, he isn't comparing his situation over against another person. Rather, he is talking about what God is doing in him, not for him so he adds “...and God's grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” (1 Corinthians

15:10) Grace is a transformative experience of God’s love which shapes us.”ⁱ

There is a sense, of course, that we are dependent upon God’s grace, as is everyone. It is grace that sustains us—that motivates us—that comforts us, as Paul says, saves us. When I had posted my frustration about “there but for the grace of God go I,” on Facebook, one reply I received was someone who has been in recovery from addiction, and she mentioned that she found great comfort in the phrase. She wrote, “Recovering addicts like me say that every day... because I know tomorrow it can be me. Statistically it will be me, so we say it to keep us right sized. We (alcoholics/addicts) get Grace one day at a time, one moment at a time. Because that's what Grace is, unearned mercy.”ⁱⁱ And I think that is true. Indeed, we all receive grace one day at a time, one moment at a time—and it is a gift—unearned and freely given. It is a phrase that expresses humility. It is a phrase that acknowledges our dependence upon God. It takes us out of ourselves. It acknowledges our need for God and for our reliance on grace.

But, my fear, as I’ve said, is that others may not hear the good news of this grace, but rather the comparison to other’s misfortune and the unintended connotation that when bad things happen it is because God has removed grace from that person. That there is a danger of thinking of grace as something I must passively rely on, that as if grace alone, without any action on my part will determine if I have a good and purposeful life or not.

Instead, I am thankful for God’s grace and recognize that it is given freely and to all. And that the purpose of this grace is for abundance and love and good things. And as Paul says later in Ephesians, God works grace through the whole body of Christ—through the entire gathered community—giving gifts so that God’s work may be done. Grace is not

something I passively receive, but rather grace is something I can act on and act out. Paul says that each of us are given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. These gifts given through the grace of God are for the purpose of building up the body and to do the work of ministry and to make sure that all grow into the full stature of Christ, that is, that we become more and more Christ-like. So that as we do the work together, it promotes grace in others and builds up all people in love.

And that is the beauty of grace, to me. That it begins with God, that it is from God, but grace is made most manifest in relationships. That there are opportunities in our life to be both a receiver of grace and a grace-giver. "God is not the sole vehicle of grace. People offer grace to one another, embody grace through actions such as forgiveness and mercy, manifest grace through art, literature, and music. Even objects and natural occurrences can be instruments of grace when we interpret them as tangible signs of God's love and the fundamental goodness of creation."ⁱⁱⁱ

"Grace, in the form of mutual trust, understanding, and kindness, allows people with vastly different personalities and histories and values and interests and preoccupations to mingle with each other in the wider world... Grace allows most of us to go to bed most nights in roughly the same decent condition in which we arose in the morning. Grace is evident in millions of mundane, ordinary acts of care that allow us to live our mundane, ordinary lives. One senses God's graciousness by observing the best of human action... human grace imitates and depicts God's grace."

This is the grace that surrounds and permeates the world. God is gracious, not angry or vengeful or punishing. Our job, if you will, is to trust and know this grace, to live in this grace, and to share this grace with others, to live lives that are humble and thankful in response to a

good and gracious God. Not to compare ourselves to others and judge, intentional or not, that suffering means the absence of God’s grace. So, perhaps it isn’t “there but for the grace of God go I,” as much as it should be “Here before the grace of God go I—and you, and you.” Here before the grace of God go all of us. Amen.

ⁱ http://www.geistchristian.org/system/refinery/resources/2016/02/12/3xvbq0l25r_201602_06_07_Really_There_but_for_the_grace_of_God_go_I_Spleth.pdf, Randy Spleth)

ⁱⁱ (Barbara M., in response to my comment on Facebook)

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/ellenpainterdollar/2012/12/there-but-for-grace-god/>