

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Redemption, Forgiveness and Grace

Ephesians 1:3-14

We talk a lot about redemption in the church. We talk a lot about forgiveness. We talk a lot about grace. But what do those words mean? And how do they affect the way we live our lives each day? Paul says, "In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us." Note that he does not say we can have redemption, forgiveness and grace someday as if it were a future promise. No, he says quite bluntly that in Christ we have redemption, forgiveness and grace, all three right now.

To be redeemed, very simply means to be set free. The image has to do with being bought with a price, a slave being purchased at a slave market and then set free. Consider the Hebrews being set free from Egypt, not so much by being bought with a price, as being freed by a power greater than the Pharaoh. God is more powerful than the greatest power on earth. Until they are set free, those who are enslaved to sin have no choice but to sin. Sin is their master, the lord who owns them, who controls their lives. Only those redeemed from sin have a choice.

Consider the worst of the financial industry today. I say the worst because I don't believe all those in the financial industry are slaves to their own self-interest. But clearly, when some in the financial industry insist on paying outlandish bonuses at a time when the nation suffers from one of the worst economic crises in its history, they demonstrate how trapped they are in sin. Sadly, they see nothing wrong with what they're doing. Because they are enslaved to a kind of thinking that is ultimately destructive not only to them, but to the rest of us, they really cannot comprehend an alternative. They are prisoners of their sin.

Now we need to be careful here. Jesus reminds us that it is all too easy to see the splinter in another's eye while ignoring the log in our own. We may be free from sin, but we are not free to judge. Since we are free from sin, we can see an alternative and we are free to pursue it. But we must recognize that others are still imprisoned by sin simply because they haven't yet recognized that God has set them free. But we applaud those who are free, who demonstrate by their lives, the freedom Christ has given them.

Not long ago Dr. Bradshaw, president of Florida Gulf Coast University declined to accept the increases called for in his contract. Doing that he demonstrated a freedom not shared by those in the financial industry. I don't know him, but I admire him. He clearly saw himself as one with his faculty and staff and chose the pathway of life. He is every bit as entitled to increases as those in the financial industry are. It's that he is not a slave to that entitlement mindset and can see himself connected to the rest of us. In short, he demonstrates the truth of redemption.

But the fact that we've been redeemed doesn't mean we don't fall back into old habits. Those who are free from sin, are free to choose the pathway of obedience to God. But we are not yet perfected in the image of Christ, thus we are still subject to our fallen nature. Because we are grateful to God for redeeming us, we choose to live a life that takes seriously God's commands. But because we are still imperfect people, we fail to be obedient in all things. To be sure, we can also choose the pathway of disobedience. That is, after all, the meaning of free will. But why would we do that? To do so would be to renounce the freedom we have been given, exchanging it for slavery again. Who wants to do that? Why would any of us choose the pathway of death and destruction once we've traveled the pathway of life? Nevertheless, when we do sin, in Christ we may be confident that we are forgiven by the grace of God.

When I lived in Iowa, one of the town leaders died leaving in his will \$25,000 to each of the six churches in town and \$50,000 to one church in the county. That totals \$200,000 in 1980 dollars, over half a million in today's dollars. The money came with no strings. Each church could use it as it pleased. Imagine what we might do if someone just dropped \$63,000 in our laps today? Would we give it all away? Would we put it in the endowment? Would we use it to repair something that is broken? It's an interesting problem. If any of you want to find out what we'd do, I'm quite sure we'll be happy to accept your gift.

It isn't every day that someone leaves a large sum of money to a church, let alone to every church in town. That gift was so audacious it was the talk of the town for days. But why did he do it? There was no explanation. Perhaps he thought that his generosity would spur others to greater generosity. Who knows? He simply did what he did because he wanted to. That's grace!

God gave us life. God gave us faith. God forgives us. God is generous to us. No real explanation's possible. That's grace! All we really can do is give thanks to God. No wonder so much of scripture is thanksgiving. People who know how gracious God has been with them quite logically are caught up in praising God. No, God hasn't died and named us in the will. We simply believe that in Christ God has adopted us into the family. That is, we're legally brothers and sisters of Christ not because we have done anything to deserve that, but simply because God decided to adopt us into the family. Thus we're qualified to share fully in God's generosity. No, that does NOT say non-Christians won't benefit from God's grace. Whatever God chooses to do, God may do. It's just that as Christians we're certain of sharing in God's benevolence. Whether or not others are included, we know we are.

More than benevolence towards us, however, we note God's generosity towards the whole creation. And God's intent or will for the creation. When we talk about God's will for the creation, we're not talking about a bequest, as if God had simply given us a gift and gone off to bigger and better things. Not at all. We're talking about God's intent, God's purpose. Why did God create the universe? For what purpose? Apart from the revelation in scripture we don't really know, do we? Like that gentleman in Iowa, God's free to do what God wants with what belongs to God. Again, like that gentleman in Iowa, unless God chooses to tell us why, we have no clue as to God's reasons. Talk about God's will for the creation, we're talking mystery. It's something neither you nor I can know unless God chooses to reveal it to us.

But that's precisely what God has done. God has not left us in the dark about God's plans. In Christ God has made known God's intent for humanity. God has revealed God's purpose for us. Not for us only, in Christ, God has opened our eyes to what God intends the creation to be like. In Christ God has showed us true humanity. But because we can see true humanity in Jesus, we also can see how far removed from true humanity we are. None of us live as Jesus lived. In Christ God has revealed the true nature of love. But that also means we know how imperfect our love truly is. None of us love as Christ loved. Yet more than showing, more than teaching, more than opening our eyes, God has done something for us and to us in Christ. God has redeemed us, set us free to become what God intends us to be.

Redemption, forgiveness and grace. We are redeemed and forgiven by the grace of God. We are being changed by God's spirit at work in our lives. We clearly aren't the same people we were ten years ago. We're not the same church we were then. It's all quite mysterious. But because we're being changed, because God's Spirit is upon us, we have hope. Indeed, in Christ, the whole world's being changed, transformed from the sinful world into a new creation.

We can't fully understand. But we can give thanks and praise God. Give thanks that we're involved in this grand work. Wonder at the mystery of our love and trust, and how it invites others to love and trust also. Like some generous old man or woman in Iowa, or for that matter anywhere, God does what God does with what belong to God. And we? In thanksgiving to God, we can do the same.