

# “The Prevenience of Grace”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

February 1, 2004

Text: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich”  
(II Corinthians 8:9).

Someone recently shared a book with me, entitled *The Question of God*, which was written by Dr. Armand Nicholi, Jr., who is an associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. In this book Nicholi contrasts the life of two very influential thinkers and writers: Sigmund Freud and C. S. Lewis. Both men dealt with two of the most basic human and religious questions: Is there a God? Does God care for me? Each man reached a very different conclusion.

Sigmund Freud died on September 26, 1939. He left behind a legacy matched by very few people who lived in the Twentieth Century. Freud was the father of what we would call

today modern psychiatry. Although many of his theories today face a great deal of criticism and controversy, none will dispute his importance. Freud's model of the understanding of the human mind is still the most developed of all.

Freud is also remembered because of his atheism. He spent a great deal of energy in his thought and writings analyzing the question of whether God exists or does not exist. For Freud the belief in God was nothing more than a human projection of a childish wish for parental protection from the difficulties of human existence. For Freud it was not possible to relate the world of human suffering with a God who was both sovereign and loving.

C.S. Lewis represented a very different perspective. When he died in 1963, Lewis the Oxford and Cambridge don, had become one of the most important spokespersons for the Christian faith in the English-speaking world. Through books such as *Mere Christianity* and the *Screwtape Letters*, as well as through his radio addresses, Lewis attracted a wide audience of believers.

Like Freud, C.S. Lewis began his early intellectual life as an atheist. But in midlife Lewis underwent a dramatic transformation. Although the two men never met, they shared much in common. Freud and Lewis both believed the question of God was the most important human question. Freud did not believe in God. For Freud the harsh reality of human existence is that we are alone in the universe. C.S. Lewis took a different approach. He once wrote, "Here is a door behind which, according to some people, the secret of the universe is waiting for you. Either that is true or it isn't. If it isn't, then what the door really conceals is simply the greatest fraud...on record." The Christian faith is distinguished by its insistence that not only does God exist, but equally in its insistence that the supreme revelation of God is found in the life, death, and resurrection. That is what the New Testament means when it speaks of the "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." The Apostle Paul does this in a number of ways.

In the Scripture that forms our text today, the Apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Corinth encourages them to come to the assistance of the Christian community in Jerusalem. Paul puts it like this: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (II Corinthians 8:9).

In writing to the church at Rome the Apostle Paul declares, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." Then again, "But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5: 6-8).

In the New Testament "grace" has to do with God's unmerited love for us. God's love is not something we earn. Rather it is something that is given to us through what Christ has done for us.

One of the chief themes that runs through all of Reformed theology is the insistence of the prevenience of grace. By that is meant that God's grace all goes ahead of us. It is God's grace that moves our hearts to repent, to believe, to trust, and to accept. That is what the Reformed

faith has always insisted that God's salvation is not something that we earn. It is something that is given freely to us.

## II.

Now, let's be honest. There is something offensive about God's grace, particularly to those of us who live in a merit society. Most of us are proud of the fact that we are successful in our professional lives, our family lives, and our personal lives. One of the reasons we are averse to financial debt is because we don't like to be beholden to other people. For the most part the members of this church are successful people who like to be in control of their lives.

That is why the gospel of Jesus Christ is a scandal to many of us. Dwight L. Moody, the famous evangelist, once told of a very successful businessman who came to him one day. "I'm a self-made man," this individual told Moody. "I'm a self-made man". "Well," said Moody, "you certainly have removed a great burden from the shoulders of almighty God."

Who of us can say with any degree of honesty that we are self-made? We did not create the world. We did not even create our own lives. Where would we be without parents who loved and cared for us, teachers who encouraged us, and friends and mentors who helped us through the difficult periods of life?

In a sermon, entitled "The Hazards and Difficulties of the Christian Ministry," Reinhold Niebuhr once told a group of seminary students in New York City that the difficulty of preaching the gospel was that the gospel often seemed least relevant to those for whom it was most relevant. The successful minister, noted Niebuhr, is in greater temptation, because he or she is more likely to deal with the powerful, the rich, the secure, and the wise. Jesus noted that the "blind, the lame, and the halt enter the Kingdom of heaven first." They know that life is broken. But people who are secure with wealth, power or political sagacity, do not believe that life has to be broken. Part of the task of preaching the gospel is persuading the people who think that the gospel is for the weak, that it is for the strong as well, and that a strong person is actually weak.

## III.

When the New Testament speaks of God's grace, it does so in two distinct ways. In the first place, grace is viewed as forgiveness.

Martin Luther, the great Reformer of the Sixteenth Century, was haunted by the question, "How can a sinful person stand in the presence of a righteous God?" Luther did everything that the medieval church offered to try to bridge this gap. He prayed night and day. He fasted to the point of almost starving himself. He confessed every sin he had every imagined he had done. But always he was haunted by the fact that he had not done enough. Luther's conversion to the gospel came by his study of Scripture--particularly the Book of Galatians and Romans. In that he rediscovered the gospel of grace. "By grace," he read in Romans, "you are saved by faith."

Sometimes human suffering is so great that people believe that their suffering removes them from God's love. Paul Tillich once told of an experience in which he was speaking to a group of Christian and Jewish refugees at the end of World War II. One of the people in the audience, an eminent Jew from West Germany, told Tillich of a cablegram he had received during the War from a friend in France who told of a sudden evacuation from Germany of ten thousand elderly Jews who were taken from their homes and sent to concentration camps. All of these people were over ninety years old. Almost none of them survived the journey to the camp. In the face of such terrible suffering, argued this Jewish man, he could not believe in a personal God.

The Apostle Paul certainly understood this. He knew these forces: the horror of death and the anxiety of life: the ambiguity of the present and the darkness of the future. He knew them as well as we know them. But he knew something else. He knew the grace of God and he was convinced that nothing--not even death itself--could separate us from that love. That is what Paul Tillich means when he says that it is not the depth of our suffering that separates us from God but the depth of our separation from God which destroys our faith in a personal God. Faith in God's providence and the faith in God's forgiveness are not two separate aspects of the faith. They are one and the same- the certainty that we can achieve eternal life in spite of our suffering and our sin.

#### IV.

God's grace is, however, not only our experience of God's forgiveness, it is our experience of God's power as well. Whenever the New Testament speaks about God's grace, it speaks not only of the power of the death of Christ to forgive our sins, but also of the power of the death of Christ to give us new life.

On a number of occasions Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick spoke of his good friend Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. If you were to meet him, Fosdick once said, you would have never suspected that this man was an alcoholic. He was a successful businessman, married with children. On the outside he seemed to have it all. But on the inside something was going on that was destroying his life. He was drinking a bottle of gin a day, and then two. He knew he should stop, but suddenly he found that he could not stop. He became so frightened that he sought help from the medical community. His doctors finally confirmed what his family knew all along: he was a helpless alcoholic. But Bill Wilson wasn't just an alcoholic; he was an agnostic as well. So, alone one day with the all this converging testimony about his hopeless alcoholism pressing in upon him, he went down on his knees in a desperate endeavor to change gods--from the god he had made to the God who had made him.

Explain it how you will, says Fosdick, that man hasn't taken another drink since. As for his agnosticism, you should hear him speak about God-- quietly, with a deep sense of mystery, not supposing that he knows much about theology, but sure, absolutely sure of one thing--that he had experienced something more powerful than his addiction itself, the power of the grace of God.

There is one final thing, and it is this. When the New Testament speaks of grace, it never does so in abstract terms, but always in terms of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. For at the heart of our faith is our conviction that this grace was poured out for us on a cross, when Jesus by his death, gave us the gift of life itself.

The cross of Christ is the most humbling thing upon this earth. A person cannot stand in front of it and be proud. He knows that he does not deserve it. He knows he has not earned it. Therefore, it evokes from us the greatest challenge of all.

As the hymn puts it,  
“Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my life, my soul, my all.”

Amen!