

The Voice of Grace  
Ephesians 2:4-10  
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Ephesians 2: 4-10

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

By grace you have been saved by faith. *And this is not your own doing.* We have been saved, rescued, *promoted*, if you will, - to sit right next to Christ; and we had nothing to do with it.

This is so contrary to the thinking in our culture where achievement is everything. Where we seem to be in competition over who is *doing* more. Where busyness is a sign of popularity, and value, and success. Promotions that are not our own doing don't compute.

But I actually had one of those. The first big promotion of my corporate career. I was not even 24 years old. I was promoted from my post-college, entry-level job in Atlanta, to a much more challenging position in northern Virginia, right outside of D.C. I'd like to say I worked hard for that position, that I wow-ed people with my brilliance and ingenuity. Ha! I could say that, because I *did* work hard, but it really wouldn't be true. Because the story was that one of our senior leaders in Atlanta sat next to me at some random training class, and saw something in me that I didn't even see. She was getting ready to retire, and she told me that before she left the company she wanted to make sure I had a place in it. Using all the power and connections she had built over her career, she secured for me an interview. They flew me in, and before I knew it I was receiving relocation benefits, moving to a place where I knew no one, for a job which I was pretty sure I hadn't earned, and had no idea if I could do.

If you had asked me if I deserved that job, I would have been able to list, without any effort, all the ways I *didn't*. If she would have taken a poll to ask if I should be promoted, I'm sure those polled would have pointed to all the obvious (and legitimate) reasons to consider someone else – she's too young, too inexperienced, too much of a risk. Frankly, those voices were right by worldly standards. But those voices would not have enabled me to thrive the way I did. Any time a voice of doubt crept into my head: I'm not good enough, I don't have enough experience, I will never be as good as the older managers, I reminded myself that someone thought this place needs me. Someone who

saw the big picture, the needs around me and my gifts, thought that I had a place here, something to contribute. And rather than trying to live into the expectations of others, I tried to live into this possibility. That unconditional favor allowed me to thrive; to take risks and to discover what I uniquely brought to the table (Gosh, at 23 years old I had no idea what I brought to the table – except great stories about my weekend adventures to my older colleagues who were home with their kids!) This unconditional favor awakened possibilities in me, but also conditioned me to look for the possibilities in others.

If any one of us had to earn our promotion to sit beside Christ, equal to the Son of God, we would all fall short. We cannot earn God's favor. Our lesson today assures us that we don't have to. This letter to the Ephesians reminds us that whatever our track record, whatever our strengths and limitations, whatever we've done, or haven't done, we've been promoted! And not some earthly promotion, but, "Raised up and seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus," it says. You and I, and the whole boatload of us sinners, we have a seat right next Christ. We got that big corner office, not because of our performance, not because we proved anything, but because God wants us there.

This passage is famous for its central line, "by grace you have been saved by faith." Grace is a distinctive characteristic of Christianity over other world religions, and God's saving grace lies at the core of what we believe as Presbyterians. We are saved, and it is not our own doing. But at the end of this

passage, we see that this gift of God's grace, while it isn't the result of our works, it is for good works. Works God has prepared beforehand. God wants to show us the immeasurable riches his grace so we can live the life God prepared for us, abundant life, as Jesus describes it. God has created you for a place and work in God's kingdom on earth, and saved you for that. God's saving grace, the outpouring of love that stunned us on the cross, allows us to be fully who God created us to be, in life-giving relationship with God in Christ, and with one another.

When you think of who God created you to be, what comes to mind? Is it what career you would pursue or how much success you would have? Is it what kind of a home you would live in, or how well you tend to it? Is it how you look or how much you know? Of course not. It's not the right body, the right job, the right income. Instead, it's right relationships. Jesus told the disciples that the most important work we have is to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to love God before anything else. That is the abundant life Christ made possible. And it's a life in which God sees a place for you. A place for which you were created, where you have value and worth. Through God's grace, you are perfect for it.

So this promotion, the one we haven't earned, we have work to do in it, but we don't have to work *for* it. We only need to believe it to be so. Scripture says that you have been saved for this place in God's world by the gift of God's grace, through *faith*. Yet, even that faith is a gift from God. With only a belief that it is true, with faith the size of a mustard seed, we are transformed –

made "alive in Christ" – for good works of love in the world. Alive in Christ. God's grace gives life, as opposed to the life-crushing judgment of this world. In God's eyes, we are made right and good, perfect in fact, despite what the world says about our unworthiness.

I love that our most recent prayer of the congregation acknowledges that our doubts and flaws "might actually be God's perfection." Perfect in the Bible doesn't mean some unattainable standard like how we use it today. It's taken from the Latin word that means "complete." We are right in God's eyes, complete, even with our flaws and our sin.

As we know, this voice of grace is often not the loudest voice in our lives. We live in a culture of not good enough. Just the opposite of my promotion, the standards for acceptance are often are unattainable. That has crept into our relationships with God. The voice of judgment drowns out God's voice of grace. The constant attention to our shortcomings diverts our attention to our unique worth in God's eyes. We question our worth. As a result, we struggle to receive the immeasurable riches of God's lavish love for us, which makes it nearly impossible to lavish the same love onto others.

Two weeks ago, on Festival Sunday, as we kicked off our Lenten them, "CONNECT with self, who am I in God's eyes?" Those of us who were here wrote down what voices we needed Jesus to drive out that keep us from hearing God's love and grace.

Hung across the front of the sanctuary, here below the pulpit and there below the lectern, are the voices we asked Jesus to drown out. In our pastoral

care meeting this week, we prayed over each one of these. We wrote in our own handwriting those that might be identified by handwriting, to protect individual privacy. These shapes come from individuals, but all of these will resonate with others. I encourage you to read them, but want you to know they are difficult to read.

These voices are jarring in their capacity to harm, but not surprising. They are life-crushing in the way that they keep us from the abundant life God has prepared for us. While they are difficult to hear, they are important to hear in the community of faith – so that we would bear one another's burdens, as Jesus taught us to do, and be comforted knowing that we are not alone in battling voices that drown out God's. We need to hear these voices, but we also need to hear the voice of grace have the last word. We need to be reminded that the last word *is* God's – a word of redeeming love.

So, with faith that God's amazing grace is for all of us, for *you*, we will give God's love, a love lavishly poured on us through the cross, the last word as Kristie and I lift up these voices.

My friends, you are right in God's eyes. Beloved, and raised up next to Jesus himself. This is a gift from God to you. Believe it is so.

Let us pray:

*God who is rich in mercy and lavish in love and grace, drown out the voices that tell me,*

*N: I am not successful enough. K: You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am not pretty enough. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am not wealthy enough. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am not smart enough. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.*

*K: I am too old to have value. N: You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am not a good wife. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am not a good parent. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am too fat. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am a failure. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.*

*N: I can't contribute. N: You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I must please everyone. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I have to be perfect. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I will fail. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.*

*K: I am not achieving enough. N: You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am not doing enough. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am not athletic enough. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am not thin enough. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.*

*N: I have no friends. N: You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am not forgiven. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am never right. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am incapable. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
I am worthless. You are God's beloved. God's perfect work.  
Amen.*

N = Nancy Dolan; K = Kristie Finley

