

“The River of GRACE”

Sermon preached by Reverend Marvin D. Sparks
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Text: 1 Peter 5:10-11
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“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you, and make you strong, firm, and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and for ever, amen!”

This morning as we consider the Mission and Vision Statement prepared by your congregational committee I want to focus our attention on GRACE which is one aspect of your committee’s work. Their message of GO, GROW, and Glorify captures the very “ACTION” of Grace at work in the people of Kirkmont.

But what is the genesis of this GRACE that your committee cites? Long before this world was formed there was God. He existed outside our time and space. And in that great void of eternity past, your Bible says the Spirit of God acted upon the void. Into that vast emptiness and disorder God stepped forth. Your Bible teaches that when there is disorder, chaos, hopelessness, loss, sin, and darkness that GOD is at WORK. That work is God’s GRACE. That is the work that we testify of in our Mission Statement. It is the unilateral action of a loving Heavenly Father. Human terms fail when we try to capture the unlimited creator’s attributes. So the best we can do in our finite mind is to frame something of God’s unlimited being in our limited understanding.

There’s always a danger describing the Almighty. How can the finite comprehend the infinite? But human words are the only method that you and I can use to grasp some limited comprehension of the majesty of the most Holy Creator God. So allow me to characterize this aspect of God’s intervention into our time and space as a River of GRACE that flows from the Father to each of us sitting here this morning. It is this RIVER Of GRACE that your Mission/Vision Committee challenges us to:

Go into the World with the message of GRACE,
Glorifying God in WORD, WORSHIP and WITNESS
Growing in Fellowship with Jesus Christ and Fellow Believers

That’s the application of Kirkmont’s Mission Statement.

How is GRACE displayed in the actions of Christians? What are the impacts of this thing called GRACE in the lives of others? The headwaters of GRACE originate with GOD. The streams and eddies flowing in the River of GRACE are given by God for specific matters known to Him for His good pleasure. We can say that the GRACE of God is the unmerited favor He extends to His own and to His creation for the accomplishment of His calling and purposes. This is the clear message articulated by the fathers of the reformation such as John Calvin and the very early church of New Testament times. They outlined GRACE as “Unmerited favor”. That’s a unique distinction of Christianity. Throughout the world there are religions that claim to

teach methods, or a series of steps, which one may follow to earn the favor of some unknown ruling deity.

It's always curious to me that most every religious recognizes the fallen state of humanity and the need for outside intervention. And yet Christianity alone understands that needed outside intervention comes only through Jesus Christ and not through our own efforts. The clear message of God, set forth in your Bible, teaches that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We all stand in need of that unique unmerited favor which only an act of GRACE can resolve. But then your Heavenly Father is never content with disorder. Our heavenly Father chooses to act out of His love for His fallen creation. Notice He takes action when there can be no other action.

Just as in the very act of CREATION, Jesus Christ, the SON OF GOD entered into time and space for the purpose of GRACE. John 1 captures GOD working through the SON as the active agent of this RIVER OF GRACE. John 1:1 sets the stage for the battle of the ages between disorder of hopeless despair and the joy of hope and promise.

John 1:1-3, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." Notice the unfolding story as we pick up the story of GRACE, which it began in the void of eternity past. The GRACE of GOD moves rapidly on to the person of Jesus Christ. John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." That singular love of GOD expressed in the GRACE given by Jesus Christ is the act of redemption culminating in the historical event we commemorate as EASTER.

This singular atoning death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is the greatest gift of GRACE. His love, expressed in his love for you, opens the gateway to the blessings of the River of Grace in your life. This gift of Salvation through Christ cannot be earned. It cannot be bought. It cannot be conferred upon you by a friend or family member. Salvation through GRACE alone is the GIFT of a loving Creator. Let's examine this gift this morning.

This morning consider Three Gifts of Grace from your Heavenly Father

1. Fulfillment for you and others:

Nothing has occupied our world more than the quest for meaning and fulfillment. I am amazed at the number of television shows directed to self-absorption and self-interest and self-contemplation. And look at the print media, filled with publications like People, Self, Me, GQ and all the rest of pop culture.

Now I believe there can be some value in understanding the pop culture of our day but fulfillment is not found in pop culture. At its very heart fulfillment finds meaning only when we can touch a purpose that transcends our life today. Fulfillment requires a meaning, an order, a structure to life, even if that order is partially veiled from us at the moment. Think about those living without meaning or purpose. Life quickly devolves into a hopeless despair.

Even Solomon the wisest who ever lived tried to plumb the depths of despair through all the very same excesses of pop culture today. Solomon sank deeper into a quest for meaning apart from God than any Hollywood pop culture icon. It is as if this cry for meaning echoes throughout the flow of human history. Listen to that stage player cry long after Solomon. Life is

but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hours upon the stage and then is heard no more. ..and I dare do all that may become a man; who dared do more is none...

But Solomon cried much earlier in hopeless despair of the human inabilities. Listen from your Bible in Ecclesiastes. Meaningless, meaningless says the teacher. Everything is meaningless. Another translation might say hopeless. Still another might say vanity. Maybe you've felt that same weight of despair at some point in life too. From a human standpoint whom among us can claim that everything in our lives has met our expectation. Even the most popular elite of our culture, live a life strewn with disappointment, family breakup, and the ravages of age and eventual health failures. So the human fulfillment and happiness of the moment is ALWAYS overshadowed by the knowledge that all things temporal are fleeting and nothing is permanent.

Maybe you've been there too. Maybe someone you love is there now. You know what it is like in the wee hours when sleep doesn't come to you. So what does your Bible offer as an alternative to the dead end of pop cultural excesses? The Bible offers FULFILLMENT and HOPE OF PROMISE. That's part of our message of Grace here this morning. Remember, in the midst of chaos there will always be your heavenly father working his grace in your life.

Moments ago we spoke of God's grace beginning in the creation work of your Lord before our time began. Did you know that His grace at work included you before you were ever formed too? The Psalmist David sings forth in joy about the truth of your purpose and fulfillment! Psalm 139:13-18, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you."

Consider, while your mother was still carrying you, God had a reason for your life. He knew the struggles you'd face. He knew the heartache you'd experience. And he KNOWS the victories that will be yours just around the corner of life and time.

And by the way there are no accidents with God. He will redeem and use those who enter this life under circumstances that some might consider accidents or even mistakes. God is in the redemption business. He redeems, restores, reclaims, and accomplishes His purpose always. Maybe you're a parent and you wonder if it all is worth it. A thousand times yes. Maybe you're a wife or a husband or a single adult and you too wonder if it is all worth it. A thousand times yes!! YES! The psalm of David gives testimony to the fact that before you were even born God's grace was at work in you. He pre-determined a plan for your life that reaches from before your birth, moment by moment, to this time here in this place on this Sunday morning. That enormous expansive River of GRACE never stops flowing from eternity past to eternity future. And you are part of that flow of God's grace.

Wow! When the days are long and you wonder if any progress is being made remember GOD ordained and established that you would be here at this very moment to be His instrument and to bring about His loving purpose for GOOD in everything you touch. True, lasting meaning and purpose comes from stepping consciously into the River of GRACE and offering your life and times to a Heavenly Father for His greater purposes. That's part of the faith journey. It is an act of decision.

I've noticed as the years have rolled by in my life that I'm just now, at age 58, beginning to glimpse something of that unfolding plan of God. Maybe it just takes a longer time horizon to see God at work in some areas. I have an idea it is the same with you. Maybe only now you can see things that happened in your life and just begin to glimpse a greater purpose for what you've been through. That's part of what I'm talking about this morning. That's part of your testimony for God's RIVER of GRACE. Maybe that's why our young people need to hear stories of how God is and was at work in mom's and dad's and grandparent's lives. I'd say that one of the most important legacies we may pass to our youth is a story of how God has worked in your life over the years.

Look at the Christian education going on in this building every day at Kirkmont. Ever wonder what God is doing here to prepare tomorrow's leaders all because you and others faithfully support God's work in this church??? Do you see these adorable little ones toddling around looking to this church and to you for an example of God's grace in action??? Do you see Pat and a host of others working to prepare little ones for God's purposes in life? That's all part of the RIVER of GRACE.

Ever wonder about your part in that River of Grace? Ever wonder what your actions will accomplish in future years? Ever wonder about the young people who follow after you?

In 1876 a group of Presbyterian people banded together to establish a very small college where education would be founded upon the truth of the Holy Bible. I doubt very many in that small group in Alabama ever thought about the greater long-term impact their step of faith in starting a small college that year. They were probably caught up in the worries of the moment. They were thinking about the needed dollars and land and buildings and the curriculum. But the grace of God was at work in them just as in you here too. This River of Grace was flowing then just as it flows in our youth programs at Kirkmont. And they were stepping into the river of GRACE by simply making themselves available to God's greater calling and purpose. And that's key, willing to step out by faith.

Twenty-five years later there was a struggling rural farm family in the dusty back roads of Alabama where a son I'll call JW was born. JW's heritage was poor. Few looked at the worldly possessions of JW and saw much more than a disadvantaged little kid who would forever live out his days toiling in the ruby red soil of a small farm plot under the boiling hot Alabama sun. But God's River of Grace was flowing even in backwoods Alabama.

One day JW heard about this little college established by a bunch of Presbyterians. So he took his share of cotton pickins and set off to school. It was said those Presbyterians would even offer a scholarship to those who felt God's calling to ministry. And that's just what JW said he was feeling in his heart. Time won't allow me to fill in all the details of that encounter of JW with the River of God's Grace. But JW graduated from that small southern Presbyterian school called Stillman College as a preacher and went on to establish a Presbyterian Church in Alabama. But the story didn't end with JW. You see JW had a son who also became a minister. JW Junior, like his father before him, was given the namesake of John Wesley. But then you'd know him by his full name JOHN WESLEY RICE, JR, a black Presbyterian minister and educator and the father of a little girl. Reverend JOHN WESLEY RICE, JR named his daughter for the "sweetness" of God's grace and mercy. And oh yes, you'd know her name too, it is Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State for America.

How does all this fit into your life? Just this, none of us know this side of eternity the consequences of each individual choice and how our actions will be used by God for his purposes. We don't know yet what our sacrifice of time, effort, and money may do in our

family, friends, and future generations. Just like those Presbyterians who stepped out by faith a generation ago, we too have the purpose and fulfillment to know with absolute certainty that each day of our lives is filled with meaning even in the most routine of circumstances.

Tomorrow is Monday morning. When your day begins know with absolute certainty that your life is important and that by surrendering fully to God's purposeful River of GRACE you have meaning, purpose and peace. Know that Psalm 139 teaches that your days of life are pre-ordained by your loving heavenly Father and are filled with the promise of hope.

The Second Gift of the RIVER OF GRACE

2. Friendship with those in Christ:

Our young people here today want to belong. They want to be included. That's one of the reasons I've so enjoyed the fellowship of our young adults serving on the Pastoral Nominating Committee. They bring a vibrancy, joy and clarity of youth that is so much needed as we seek the next pastor for Kirkmont. Let me give you just one example of the simple unclouded clarity of your young adults here at Kirkmont. A month ago your PNC was concluding preparation of a document that summarizes the beliefs of Kirkmont. The question of whether the language your PNC chose to describe God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit might be sexist. Someone not part of your congregation might ask why the Kirkmont PNC would use such sexist language to describe God the Father and God the Son Jesus Christ? There was a slight pause in the meeting before a young adult on your PNC simply said: "we just believe what the Bible says and so how could we say anything different about God?"

That is clarity and maturity of thought unclouded by denominational politics or pop culture or political correctness. And isn't that what family is all about. God bringing together different members called by grace for the greater accomplishment of his purposes. We are truly sisters and brothers in Christ. We each bring to the table a skill set, an intellectual perspective, and a capability, that is so needed for the body to holistically function.

Paul talks about unity and FRIENDSHIP. He doesn't downplay the differences of personality and gifting in Christians that he describes as the body of Christ in this age. Listen as Paul speaks. Romans 12:4-13: "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." Talk about friendships, joy, fun, purpose, and fulfillment! That kind of FRIENDSHIP with your sisters and brothers is the spice and zest of life.

The Third Gift of the River of GRACE

3. Faithfulness now and forever – God’s promises are sure, certain, steadfast and trustworthy for all things in life and ETERNITY.

In the days of Adam’s fall that tarnished all of humanity with sin there was God who acted in GRACE promising a savior who would one day crush Satan’s claim on your soul. Throughout the Bible when darkness seemed to reign, when hope was lost, when sin abounds, there has always been the GRACE of God at work. OUR LORD is FAITHFUL and JUST. HE WILL KEEP HIS PROMISES IN HIS WORD. While friends may come and go GOD is always FAITHFUL.

Colonel Jeff O’Leary wrote *Taking the High Ground*¹. It is a collection of true stories of women and men in the military. In his book, Colonel O’Leary lets Bigadier General Dick Abel tell about picking up the first group of POWs at the close of the Vietnam era. Dick Abel writes in O’Leary’s book: of his preparation and excitement at flying into Hanoi to pick up this first group of men who had served their country in captivity under torturous conditions. Dick Abel says their reaction was the same each time.

These American heroes would see the big old C141 sitting on the simmering tarmac at Hanoi. They knew their old life as prisoners was ending. Silently they’d stream across the tarmac and board the old C141 workhorse. With almost unbelieving eyes these men readied themselves for take off. Among them were those former American POWs who had been maimed in war including three in body casts.

You can almost hear the engines of that C141 spool up. Yet the men would sit onboard quietly, almost as if in unbelief at the wonderful prospect of going home. Then that old Starlifter of the Air Mobility Command gathered speed away from the pain of Hanoi and lifted off. As the wheels came up and the gear whine subsided, Dick Abel said there was the terrific sound of joyous shouts, praises to God and love displayed in hugs and tears throughout that aircraft cabin. Can you imagine the emotion of that moment when the cares of Hanoi were left on the ground as that jet climbed toward glory?!!! That’s part of the River of Grace too.

BUT the real story of these dear soldiers is their absolute reliance on the FAITHFULNESS of GOD to see them through one of life’s most horrific experiences as POWs. The testimonies of how these men withstood years in captivity is always filled with their stories of how GOD met them in their hour of greatest need. God is Faithful and HE will meet you in your hour of greatest need too.

God is Faithful in other places and ways too. Step with me now into another paradox place. It is a “way station” between this temporal world and eternity to come. It is a portal of sorts. You’ll find that place on Wilmington Avenue in East Dayton. Inside those buildings are people who have been given an incredible opportunity. They are those patients and workers in a place we call Hospice of Dayton.

You see whether we acknowledge it or not some day we’ll all be standing at the precipice of eternity. Some of us may have the opportunity of facing that greatest adventure with imminent anticipation. Such are those at Hospice. They know there is more to human existence than this life. They know that our days here are passing. And they know something of the promise that a loving Heavenly Father has for each one of us. These dear ones are preparing to leave this old world behind and travel to their eternal home. And they know the Faithfulness of God’s GRACE given to each in the moment of our greatest need.

The River of Grace we’ve been considering this morning has this last component too. You see we’re all leaving footprints in the sand of time on the shoreline of that River. All any of

us want to know is that our life counts for a greater purpose. And that's just what your Bible authoritatively preaches from the earliest of recorded history to your life and times today.

In a short few weeks we'll celebrate the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. We all understand that his death on that cruel cross was a necessary and wonderful love gift that covers all our sins. But Easter... But Easter is the promise... But Easter is the CERTAINTY of something else so wonderful so marvelous for you too.

EASTER is the absolute victory over sin and death. JESUS CHRIST and His resurrection carry the certainty that it does not end in Hanoi, or in the Upper Highlands. It did not end on Normandy, or faraway places, or HOSPICE with a good-bye kiss or with tears rolling down. It does not end in a place called IRAQ or on a highway or with chest pain or with a thousand other lonely events common to us all. At those times in life and death, the triumph of the ages rises to touch us promising that there is a coming reunion with loved ones. That's part of the River of Grace too!

And there is so much more just around the bend in that River of Grace flowing from the throne of your loving Savior. YOU, by virtue of this RIVER of GRACE, have been given a gift unspeakable in its wonder called ETERNAL LIFE in CHRIST. This morning I'm asking you to step into this River of GRACE. I'm asking you to accept fulfillment of God's purposes for your life, God's friendship through Christ, and God's faithful promises for all eternity.

The Bible says that someday, just like those at Hospice, we'll all stand waiting for transport to eternity. Paul, in your Bible, says that new life for you is unspeakably joyful, wonderful, fulfilling, and totally free of the limitations of this known world. The question, therefore, echoing through the halls of time in this room this day is this: How can I receive this gift of grace that offers eternal life????!! Romans 10:9-10, "That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

How is God's grace unfolding in your life??? None of us will ever understand all the ebs and flows of the River of GRACE until eternity. But ever so often we have the joy of just glimpsing the flash of a passing truth and the holy majesty of our Creator God.

May it be so for you this day and always!

May He grant you Songs in the NIGHT
and JOY in the MORNING
Now and forevermore!

To God be the Glory!

¹ Taking the High Ground; by Colonel Jeff O;Leary; Victor Publishing; 2001