



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

June 7, 2015

**By Grace**  
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: June 12, 2015

*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 (Ephesians 2:8-10).*

One of the great spiritual traps of our culture is the sense of deserving, the notion that whatever I get, I deserve.

It's not hard to see why people like that idea, at least when things are going well. It's flattering and feeds our self-esteem. If I'm successful it's because I'm talented and smart and work hard; I deserve my success. If I've made lots of money it's because I earned it and I deserve it. If people like me, that must mean I'm likeable. And if somebody loves me, it's a sure sign that I must be lovable.

It's not at all hard to see why people like the notion that we deserve all the good things we have. But it's also a trap. It's a trap because that attitude can make us ungrateful and anxious and self-centered, and more importantly, it keeps us from really knowing and trusting the love of God.

It's obvious enough how a sense of deserving makes us ungrateful. After all, if I deserve every good thing I have, what is there to be grateful for? People may be grateful for the gifts they receive but not for the things they've earned. The whole point of deserving something is that you don't have to be grateful for it.

But the sense of deserving also makes people anxious. If all the good things I enjoy are my own doing, then the pressure is on to keep the good things coming because that's how I measure my self-worth. I'm only as good as my

last performance, the last sale I made, the last thing I did that somebody recognized me for and appreciated. A sense of deserving makes people anxious for another reason, too: because sooner or later bad things will happen, and then what? What will we make of those? If I deserve all the good things that happen to me, do I also deserve all the bad? If I don't get the job, or I don't make the sale, or if no one appreciates what I did, does that mean I'm just not good enough?

We get anxious because our self-esteem hangs on what we think we deserve. That may work when things are fine, but when things are not going so well we either feel bad about ourselves or look around for someone else to blame. Sometimes we want to cast blame even when what happens is nobody's fault. An illness or an accident strikes and we ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" The answer may be "Nothing; you didn't do anything to deserve it." But now we're tempted to resent the unfairness of life, or even the unfairness of God, because we've conditioned ourselves to think we deserve whatever we get, and we know we did not deserve this bad thing that happened.

And all of this just feeds our focus on ourselves, which is the very thing we need to be saved from most. As someone has said, the smallest package in the world is a person all wrapped up in himself.

A strong sense of deserving undermines gratitude, stirs up anxiety, and feeds our preoccupation with ourselves. For all those reasons and more, it also blinds us to the love of God and keeps us from learning to trust God deeply.

The letter to the Ephesians says, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is

the gift of God....” Grace is sometimes called “unmerited favor.” It means getting more and better than we deserve, being loved and treated well, not because we are lovable but because the one who loves is gracious. Grace is always a gift.

Few concepts are more counter-cultural in our society than the notion of grace. Advertisers and our own egos are forever telling us that we deserve every good thing we have and more. It’s hardly surprising, then, that this way of thinking colors our faith too. I’m struck by how many people in churches still think they’re on their way to heaven because they’re basically good people and they deserve to be there. Conversely, when people really make a mess of things and do something they feel terrible about, they sometimes say, “I know God is gracious, but I don’t deserve grace”—which only goes to show that they still don’t know what grace is. Of course we don’t deserve grace. That’s precisely the point. Grace is goodness we don’t deserve: the love, mercy, forgiveness, kindness, generosity that come to us not because we are good but because God is good.

Gerald May, the late Christian psychiatrist and writer on spirituality, said that grace is the most powerful force in the universe. It has the power to heal and redeem and make all things new. Grace, he says, is where our hope lies.

Grace is what saves us. It frees us from the perennial preoccupation with ourselves and what we deserve, so we don’t have to be anxious any more about whether or not we’re good enough. Our self-esteem comes not from our own goodness, which is a flickering thing at best, but from the goodness of God, whose love never fails. God says, “I love you, and you matter because you belong to me, and I am the Maker of heaven and earth.” Is there any better

place, any place more secure, to rest our self-esteem?

Grace comes to us as a gift in so many ways that we can't count them all. In fact, the whole Christian life is one great cycle of grace and gratitude. In New Testament Greek the cycle revolves around the same root word. *Charis* is God's grace, which showers us with gifts, *charismata*, as in our word "charismatic," and our natural response is gratitude, *eucharistein*, to give thanks, which is another name for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist.

The more we live in this cycle of grace and gratitude, the more freedom and joy and peace we find. We don't need to be so anxious anymore about what we deserve and what we don't deserve. We see all the good things that come our way for what they are: gifts from a God who loves us. And we don't waste so much time and energy worrying about why the bad things happen. Instead, we turn for courage and strength and peace to the God who promises "My grace is sufficient for you; for power is made perfect in weakness."

And the freer we are from preoccupation with ourselves, the more useful we can be to others—which turns out to be yet another occasion for joy and peace. Grace is contagious. The more we experience it, the more it shapes our souls and the more gracious we become.

*The Man of La Mancha* is playing this month at the CLO. It's one of my favorite musicals and has, to my mind, one of the best lines ever written in a play. A woman whom Don Quixote treats far better than she thinks she deserves asks him why he does all these crazy things, and Don Quixote replies, "I hope to add some measure of grace to the world."

There's a motto to live by. So much of our world is so ungracious these days. People pursuing just their own interests and preoccupied with their own sense of deserving tend not to be very gracious, and they make the world around them a smaller and meaner place. But the God who made us is gracious and merciful, as the psalmist says, and the people in whom the image of God shines brightest are gracious and merciful too.

The letter to the Ephesians says “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing—it is a gift from God.” We can't earn our salvation. In fact one of the things we need to be saved from is precisely our sense of deserving. But that doesn't mean we sit back and bask self-centeredly in the gifts of God. On the contrary, we have work to do in this world, so the writer goes on to say, “We are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

God means for us to add some measure of grace to the world. That is in fact why we're here: to reflect the grace and mercy and love of God to other souls who long to find those things.





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