Prevenient Grace – Jeff Belt

**[^ black screen ]** Please join with me in praying the Prayer to the Holy Spirit, found on page 48 of your purple worship book.

*Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and we shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth.*

*O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations. Through Christ our lord. Amen.* You may be seated.

Those of you from this area probably remember a number of years ago when you would enter the main entrance to the Indian Mound Mall you were hit by the wonderful smell of baking cinnamon rolls. Well, our family came to Heath from Zanesville to do some shopping, and sure enough as we walked into the Mall, we were enveloped by this wonderful smell. So as we made our way further into the Mall, the smell got stronger and stronger. Of course the smell leads us right to its source, Cindy’s Cinnamon Rolls. Well, as you can probably guess we had to purchase one of those cinnamon rolls, after they had slathered rich gooey icing over the top of the roll. I asked the girl who served us how we were able to smell those rolls baking at the front entrance of the Mall. She took me to the door of their kitchen and showed me two large fans blowing the wonderful smell of those rolls out into the Mall.

That initial encounter at the entrance of the Mall drew us to its source and we simply couldn’t resist purchasing and enjoying one of those, no two, well … if you need to know … three of those wonderful cinnamon rolls. The name of this talk is **[^] Prevenient Grace** and my name is **[^] Jeff Belt.**

It is our hope that over the course of these next three days you will experience the love and grace of God. You are probably asking, well then, just **[^] what *is* the grace of God?** You need to remember that grace is first and foremost a gift from God. It is God’s unmerited favor towards us that has been, and continues to be, revealed through Jesus Christ.

Another way to look at grace is in the letters of the word **[^] grace** itself in the form of an acrostic: **[^] God’s [^] Riches [^] at [^] Christ’s [^] Expense.** Because of Jesus Christ, God offers us the gift of a relationship that includes salvation, reconciliation, and ultimately eternal life with him.

God’s grace is revealed to us through Jesus Christ and works in our lives in many ways and in several stages. They are prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. Each of these describes the various stages of our spiritual journey, our growth in grace.

You are going to hear a lot about God’s grace these next three days and this morning I want to share with you the first phase or working out of God’s grace in our lives which is called **[^] prevenient grace.** **Prevenient grace is [^] at work from the moment of our conception to our conversion.** It takes place from the moment our lives start until the time when we accept for ourselves the relationship God offers us in Christ.

Our English word for prevenient comes from the Latin word praevenire, which means “to come before”. **Essentially it means [^] the grace that comes before any human decision or endeavor.** In other words, **God’s prevenient grace is [^] at work in our lives before we are even aware of it.**

Another way of looking at this aspect of God’s grace is that it is the love of God **[^] wooing us.** Remember the smell of those wonderful cinnamon rolls that caught our attention when we entered the Mall and drew us to its source? This is how God draws us to himself. He woos us. Prevenient grace is the courtship period of our relationship with God. It is the time when God is reaching out to us, maybe getting our attention, and helping us see that a relationship between God and ourselves is something he deeply desires.

Prevenient grace is the desire of God **[^] pursuing us** throughout our lives to bring us into a relationship with him. God is like the hound of heaven, seeking us out, pursuing us to the ends of the earth, and the end of time.

It is also the gift of God **[^] freeing us** so that we might have the opportunity to respond to God’s offer of a relationship and place our trust in Jesus Christ (Romans 8:31-39).

It is also the activity of God **[^] empowering us**, giving us spiritual strength (Romans 5:6).

**[^] The biblical message or the heart of what God is saying to us through his Word is simply that we as humans are created in his likeness in order to have a relationship with him.** In this story we know that after God created all things, he said that it was good (Genesis 1:1-25).

God then created humankind, male and female, in his own image and likeness and said that it was very good (Genesis 1: 26-31).

And thus, the divine-human relationship was deep and meaningful. Because of this relationship, each of us is a unique and beloved child of God. Also each of us has the capacity to love and to be loved. Finally, each of us is a spiritual being. I guess another way of saying this is that we are wired for God from the very beginning. Due to the fact that we are wired for God and each of us are created in God’s image and likeness, the deepest and most essential part of us longs for a relationship with God. As St. Augustine said in his “Confessions”, “Our hearts will not rest until they find rest in God.”

As this biblical story continues, we know that something happened: sin became a part, in fact a *major* part, of the human experience. But we must always remember that **[^] the bad news of human sin is preceded by the good news of our origin in God.** Adam and Eve made wrong choices that cost them their place in the Garden and brought disorder to all of creation, yet God provided for them (Genesis 3, 6:1-11).

Each of us, as well, has made wrong choices. Our default setting is our sinful nature; each of us is born into sin. It is in our DNA. As Paul notes, “For all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The result of this sin that brings about making wrong choices separates us from God and diminishes our spiritual lives. But here is the good news: **that [^] God’s love and grace are greater than all our wrong choices.** Just like God provided for Adam and Eve, God provides for us as well. In spite of our sin, and in spite of our wrong choices that separate us from God, **[^] God continues to offer us a relationship.** You must always remember that **[^] God desires a relationship with us even more than we want a relationship with him.**

**The nature of [^] our relationship with God is a covenantal relationship.** So often when we think about love, we talk about it in terms of our feelings. We also tend to think of love in terms of romantic love. God’s love, however, is deeply rooted in covenantal love. It is not based on feelings, but, instead, is based upon choice. In other words God chooses to love us, period. It is his choice to love us.

**[^] A covenant in the biblical text is the strongest form of a relationship between two parties.** We see this covenantal love lived out in the relationships that God initiated – note, that I said *God* initiated – with the following individuals:

Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) God established a covenantal relationship with Noah in that he uses Noah to save the human race by building the ark. The covenant was based on the truth that God would never again judge the world by flooding it, and the rainbow is the sign of this covenant.

Abraham (Genesis 15:18-21) God established a covenant with Abraham by making him the father of a great nation. In their old age, God allowed Sarah and Abraham to have a child, a son, who would carry on the promise God made with Abraham. It was then, through Abraham and the covenant that God makes with him, that the promise was fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, that all the nations would be blessed through him.

Moses and Israel (Exodus 19:3-6) God delivered the Hebrews from slavery and established the continuation of the covenant that he made with Abraham. It would be through the nation of Israel that the Law would be given and through them as well that the Messiah would come.

David (2 Samuel 7:5-16) God establishes a covenant with David that through him the Messiah would come and reestablish the throne and rule of the Lord in this world.

**[^ blank screen ]** In each of these covenantal relationships, God was in the process of not only establishing a relationship with them as individuals, but God was also working towards reestablishing a relationship with all of humankind. What a God!

As we look further into the biblical story, the prophets that God raised up were constantly calling the Hebrew people back to the relationship that God had desired with them. This relationship on their part was to be based on love and obedience to God (Hosea 3:1-5). They were also pointing to the promise of a new covenant that God would bring about to its completion with the coming of his Son. This new covenant would be one in which God would write his will upon the hearts of his people (Jeremiah 31:31-34). **[^] This future covenantal relationship would be brought about by Jesus Christ, God’s Son through his death and resurrection.**

This **[^]** new relationship between God and humanity would reveal:

**[^] a truly divine love** (John 3:16); **[^] a seeking love** (Luke 19: 2-10); **[^] an everlasting love** (John 13:34-35); **and [^] the gift of love itself** (John 3:16).

Prevenient grace tells us that **[^] God is always the one who takes the initiative to seek us in the hopes that we will respond to his grace.** Likewise, not only does this divine initiative of grace seek us out, **[^] it also helps us overcome our brokenness and alienation from God, others and ourselves** (Luke 15:20-32).

So how do we experience God’s prevenient grace? When I share about my own life I tell people that I first became aware of God in my life when I was in the second grade. I know that I had been exposed to the things of God when I was in kindergarten because I attended a school that was at the Baptist church in Richmond, Virginia. But in the second grade I began to see God as a part of my life.

**[^ blank screen ]** One of the things that we did in class that year to reinforce what we had read was to make a shadow box. A shadow box is simply a shoe box that has a small opening in one side of the box, large enough so that you can see into the box, and a small opening in the top to allow light to seep into the box. Inside the box we would then put cut-out figures and scenery to tell about the book that we had just read. My understanding of God came when I realized that I was in the shadow box and that God was looking into my life.

I can look back in my life and see where God placed people and experiences that he used as stepping stones upon which I would walk towards him. He used family members- a great grandmother, friends, a Sunday school teacher-Mrs. Vaden, pastors, youth groups, movies and many other people and experiences to bring me to him. I am sure one day he will show me and you all of those people and experiences that he used to woo us to him. At that time, I did not know what God was doing for me but once I accepted the gift of salvation offered to me through Christ, I began to see these gifts of God’s grace. Please note that the Holy Spirit was doing his work through all these and many others to speak to my heart of how much God loved me.

**[^] How do we experience God’s prevenient grace?** Well as I mentioned through my own experiences, **we experience this part of God’s grace [^] through events, both positive and negative.** The Holy Spirit can speak to our minds and hearts through the struggles, frustrations, and difficulties, and pain of such experiences in our lives like losing a job, going through a divorce, or the loss of a loved one. I know for myself that there were moments in my life before Christ became my Lord and Savior, that I saw only my own limitations and failings as a person in this world. I know that God used even those moments and events to draw me towards him.

The Holy Spirit can also speak to us through such things as music, art and beauty (John 16:13-15). It is through these that we see the beauty of God’s creative work and realize that we have a higher purpose than we thought we had.

**We also experience God’s prevenient grace [^] through the care and sacrifice of others** who embody God’s love toward us, for example our parents, relatives and friends (2 Timothy 1:5). In my life was not so much that people told me that God loved me, although that was important, it was the individuals who lived out that love that had the biggest impact on my life. I would say that this still holds true today for me.

**We also experience God’s prevenient grace [^] through the body of believers,** the church. The church helps us experience God’s grace and presence through corporate worship, prayer, the sacraments, and small groups (Ephesians 4:11-16). As a young person, church life, youth groups, and various worship experiences were an important part of my early spiritual journey toward Christ.

**We experience God’s prevenient grace through [^] the Holy Spirit awakening our conscience** and convicting us to the truth that we can never reform ourselves or earn a place in God’s family (2 Cor. 7: 9-11).

Perhaps this is the most important way that God reveals his grace to us. He loves us so much that he wants us to come to that point where we realize that we are lost and truly at the end of our rope and in need of his help. The amazing thing is that God never violates our wills. God never usurps our decisions, but he always makes himself known to us as the One who wants and is more than willing to save us and make us right with him. In fact he is the only One who can help us.

**God’s prevenient grace comes to us [^] through the courting of the Holy Spirit.** As I just shared with you, God never forces himself upon us. But he does everything within his power to show us who he is, who we are, and our need for him. He also shows us that he deeply desires to have a personal relationship with us that is covenantal in nature.

Can you smell those cinnamon rolls? Oh boy, don’t they look almost too good to eat? Yes God’s grace, his prevenient grace draws us to him, makes us hunger for him, just like I know that each of you would love to take a bite out of one of these.

And once we become his and accept what he has offered us through his Son, we in turn can be instruments in his hands to reveal his grace, his prevenient grace to others through our words, attitudes and actions in order to help others open their hearts and lives to this God of mercy and grace. **[^ blank screen ]**

How has God’s grace touched your heart? Look back. What do you see? What do you remember? Do you see where he has been in your life using people and experiences to touch your life by his grace?

Thus in light of all that I have shared with you the very important question for you today is simply this: will you open your hearts to God and accept the relationship he offers to us in Jesus Christ?

**[^] De Colores! [^ black screen ]**

Scripture References

Romans 8: 31-39

Romans 5: 6

Genesis 1: 1-25

Genesis 1: 26-31

Genesis 3, 6: 1-11

Romans 3: 23

Genesis 9: 8-17

Genesis 15: 18-21

Exodus 19: 3-6

2 Samuel 7: 5-16

Hosea 3: 1-5

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

John 3: 16

Luke 19: 2-10

John 13: 34-35

John 3: 16

Luke 15: 20-32

John 16: 13-15

2 Timothy 1: 5

Ephesians 4: 11-16

2 Corinthians 7: 9-11