Justifying Grace

*Please turn to page 48 in your Worshipbook and join me in the Prayer to the Holy Spirit.*

*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)**

When I was a young pastor’s wife, in the third appointment of my husband’s career, I was asked to give a program for my young mothers’ circle about what it was like to be a Pastor’s Wife. We were preparing to move on to our next appointment, and the reason for the request was that these women wanted to be more sensitive and helpful to the next family that would be moving in. When I finished giving the program, one woman turned to me and said, “I’m sorry I didn’t take the time to get to know you. I feel like I really missed something.”

Have you ever experienced anything like that? Have you had the opportunity to befriend someone when you did not take the time, and later regretted it? Or, to flip the coin, was there someone you would have liked to have befriend you, and they never responded? There are feelings of regret on both sides of that coin.

I often think of God and how it must feel to be rejected so often by his children.

You see, God offers to each one of us a relationship of unconditional love and grace.

**My name is Cheryl Evans, and the title of this talk is JUSTIFYING GRACE.**

In the beginning God created the world, the cosmos, and all things in it—including human beings—and when the creation was completed, God saw that it was all good. You can read that story in your Bibles in Genesis, chapters 1 and 2.

What happened to change that? Wrong choices. God took his human creations, Adam and Eve, on a tour of the garden. He said everything there was for their use and enjoyment. He pointed out one tree, and said that they were not to touch it, or eat its fruit. One tree, out of all the myriad of good things that were there for them in the garden. There was a serpent, who offered temptation. They fell for it, and ended up being expelled from the garden.

Wrong choices separate us from God and diminish our spiritual lives. The scriptures are full of illustrations of this fact. Jesus himself told the story of the prodigal son, which is recorded in Luke chapter 15: verses11-17.

Jesus tells this story to illustrate the nature of God. God is always there, offering us forgiveness, no matter what we have done, and is always welcoming us with the embrace of unconditional love. God’s gifts of love and grace are greater than all of our wrong choices.

Because God created us in God’s own image and designed us for a living relationship with God, nothing else can satisfy our soul—not money, not accomplishments, not human relationships, not power.

The central theme of the Bible is the story of God constantly calling us back into the relationship for which we were created.

In Matthew 11 verse 28 and Luke 19 verses1-10, Jesus called people to accept the relationship God offers them.

**Matthew 11:28**

**My great grandfather was an oxen trainer**. If you aren’t sure what a yoke is, these two oxen are yoked together. When you train an ox to work with a yoke, the inexperienced ox is yoked to one that has been trained and is knows how to adapt to the yoke. I’m guessing the inexperienced ox is the one in the forefront of the picture. He doesn’t look too happy, does he? Notice that my great grandfather has his hand on a horn of each ox.

Jesus says “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” The difference, he says, is that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

**Luke 19:1-10** tells the story of Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector and very rich. Tax collectors were hated by everyone because in those days, they could collect whatever they demanded, turn in what was actually owed, and keep the rest for themselves. They enriched themselves at the expense of others who were powerless to stop them. Zacchaeus was curious about Jesus. Jesus was walking with a crowd behind him. Zacchaeus was very short, so he could not see for the crowds. He climbed up in a tree. When Jesus came close to the tree, he called Zacchaeus by name and asked him to come down. Jesus says that he must stay at his house that day. Zacchaeus was shocked, no doubt. Everyone in the crowd who saw and heard this began to grumble. “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” As Jesus visits in his home, Zacchaeus repents, saying, “Look, Lord. Half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Jesus said, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this too, is a son of Abraham. For the son of man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

There are many who claim to offer a path of salvation, but we need to remember that God offers us a personal relationship of self-giving love and not a system of rules and regulations. The scripture reference for that statement is in I John chapter 4, verses 7-12.

God’s grace is ever present, and always available. Justifying grace is at work when we say yes to God. Our acceptance changes everything.

In the story of the prodigal son, Justifying grace is evident when he turns away from his misery and decides to return home. Likewise, when we accept the relationship God offers, we are restored to relationship with the One who knows and loves us far better than we know and love ourselves.

Using the analogy of courtship, as you heard in the Prevenient Grace talk, when we accept God’s grace, we say yes to the one who has been wooing us and pursuing us, desiring a relationship with us. As in courtship, saying yes changes the nature of the relationship completely. Love has won, and yes marks the beginning point of a lifelong commitment to a shared life.

There is nothing we can do to merit a relationship with God. We can do nothing to earn it. It is offered as a free gift from God. All we have to do is accept the gift God offers to us.

The salvation that comes with acceptance is both instant and continuous.

The Christian Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck quotes the poet Rumi when he says “*I have been saved, I am saved, and I will be saved.”* Yes. By grace alone.

Other terms for this spiritual experience of justifying grace are found in scripture: salvation, healing, conversion, having one’s sins forgiven and being born again.

I mention M. Scott Peck. He became very popular with his book *The Road Less Traveled.”* For most of his life, was a very devout atheist. He had his own conversion experience as he was practicing psychiatry. In his practice he came up against the reality of evil. He felt there was no other way to explain some of the things he came up against. For instance, he was seeing a young man who was seriously troubled. This young man’s brother had committed suicide. On this young man’s next birthday, his parents gave him the very gun that his brother had used to kill himself. This sensitive young man was devastated. He felt his parents were telling him to do the same thing. Dr. Peck called the parents in for a session. He found them to be oblivious to any implications of their gift. To them, it was an economic decision. “It was a perfectly good gun, and every boy should have a gun.”

Dr. Peck struggled to understand how such things could happen. He decided that evil was real, and sought a way to combat it. He studied a variety of things, including the Bible. In it he discovered Jesus, the man even the evil ones knew as the Son of God. He became a devout Christian.

Jesus himself demonstrated justifying grace when he gave his life for us on the cross to prove God’s love for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

**The vertical line on the cross** symbolizes that Jesus’ sacrifice restored our relationship with God

**The horizontal line on the cross** symbolizes the restoration of our relationship with our neighbor (2 Cor. 5:18-20)

The conversion process continues as we keep saying yes to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

**The way this process involves us** is that we

1. come to understand ourselves better and acknowledge our continual need for Christ;
2. come to understand God better and seek more earnestly for God’s will in our lives; and
3. practice the essential spiritual disciplines of prayer, scripture reading, meditation and active obedience in the ongoing conversion of our will to God’s will.

Remember:

1. God said yes to us in creation, and again in the cross.
2. God addresses us in a variety of ways; we respond in faith.
3. God appeals to our wills; by grace we are free to choose.
   * God does not dictate our response; it is a free decision
   * Christian faith is an act of trust and self-denial. We take up the cross and follow a crucified and risen Lord. (Matt. 16:24-26)
4. God touches our hearts; we respond in love and enthusiasm. However, we cannot depend upon our feelings or trust in our emotions. Our trust and dependency is on God alone.

One way God moves us to the point of acceptance, healing, salvation or conversion is through the loving acts of other Christians. This kind of God-love is called *agape,* which is theGreek word for God’s unconditional, gracious love. We can never earn or deserve God’s love; it is a gift of grace.

You are experiencing unconditional love expressed by Christians in sacrificial ways. People are praying for you. People are preparing your meals, people are cleaning up after you and performing other acts of agape—all so you will see, feel and know more clearly how much God loves you.

Emmaus communities from across this nation and around the world have sent letters and other forms of communication to let you know about this agape love that is being showered upon you. Here are some examples. These and more will be posted around the room this weekend so that you can enjoy and appreciate them. Here also is the 72-hour prayer vigil chart, where people have signed up to pray for you throughout this weekend.

Remember that God loves you! **DeColores!**