Grace to You

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Ephesians 2:4-10

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In an interview some years ago, basketball superstar Lebron James said, “In Northeast Ohio, nothing is given. Everything is earned. You work for what you have.”

Like Lebron James, I grew up in Northeast Ohio. You may be thinking we’re related somehow. While I am happy to claim him as family, what I really want to do is invite him to participate in our Ignite campaign.

Parents and teachers drilled into us this “nothing is given, everything is earned” outlook into my head. Respect has to be earned. Trust has to be earned. Grades have to be earned. Money has to be earned. Most everything you want in life has to be earned.

I carried this attitude over into my religious outlook. I figured God’s favor, what we call grace, had to be earned also.

I am here to tell you today that God’s favor cannot be earned. You could not earn it even if you tried. Today’s passage is a stake in the heart to this “everything is earned” mantra. In matters of faith, nothing is earned and everything is given.

Today, we begin a summer sermon series called “Go-To Verses.” What Bible verses do you go to when your back is against the wall and you need encouragement? Our pastoral staff will be preaching on our favorite Bible passages this summer. We urge you to share your favorite Bible verses with each other. These verses will take on added meaning when we share why they are important to us.
The passage Glenda read is one of my all-time favorite verses. Admittedly, this passage will not wow you, as some verses will. Yet, the truth of these words changed the trajectory of my life.

The first ten verses of Ephesians 2 constitute a single sentence in the original Greek—124 words in all. Paul loves long sentences. In the previous chapter, he writes a 267-word sentence and, later in the same chapter, he composes another 167-word sentence. My English teachers would have a fit with Paul’s run-on sentences.

What you need to know is that Paul dictated most of his letters. He spoke what was on his heart and a scribe copied down everything he said. I doubt Paul was the least bit concerned about run-on sentences. God’s grace so enraptures Paul that he breaks forth into all sorts of superlatives and subordinate clauses.

The best way I know to make sense of a run-on sentence is to diagram it. I cannot believe I am saying this to you. My English teachers would be turning in their graves if they knew I was touting the value of diagramming sentences.

What I remember is that you create a base line on the top line of your diagram. This is where you put the subject, verb and object of any sentence. A subject is the person or thing that performs the action. The verb is the word or words used to describe the action. The direct or indirect object of the sentence is the person or thing acted upon by the subject.
The subject of verses 1-10 does not appear until verse 4: “But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy....” God is the subject because God is the one who performs the action. So we place God as the subject in the left top line of our diagram.

Next, we locate the verb. There are three main verbs in this sentence: God made alive (2:5), God raised up (2:6) and God seated (2:6). We, therefore, place “made alive,” “raised” and “seated” in the middle section of our base line diagram. Paul compares what God has done physically in Christ to what he has done spiritually in our lives. As God made Christ alive, so He makes us alive. As God raised Christ from death to life, so His Spirit raises us to new life. As God seated Christ at the heavenly realm, so He seats us with Christ.

Finding the object of this sentence now comes easily for us. The object of the sentence is “us.” God made us alive with Christ. God raised us with Christ. God seated us with Christ.

All of this is prelude to the main idea of this long sentence, “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith. It is not your own doing. It is the gift of God.” Earlier, in verse 5, Paul speaks about “God who is rich in mercy and loves us.” Then Paul interjects at the end of the verse, “It is by grace you have been saved.” Later, in verse 7, Paul writes about “the incomparable riches of his grace.”

It all comes down to grace. Grace is foundational to Paul’s theology. Grace, from the Greek charis, appears 100 times
in Paul’s letters. God’s grace saves us. Grace is a gift we receive in faith.

Somehow, I thought I had to earn God’s favor. Glory be! The ground shifted when I first realized I do not need to earn grace. I could not earn God’s favor even if I tried. Let me go back to Lebron’s quote. When it comes to God’s grace, nothing is earned and everything is given. Grace is a gift we receive in faith. In C.S. Lewis’ words, “God loves us not because we are loveable, but because God is love.”

Bill Hybels writes something in his book *Becoming a Contagious Christian* that I find helpful here. He contrasts religion with Christianity. Hybels spells religion D-O. Religion is all about trying to do something to please God. Yet, how will we ever know if we have done enough to please God? Hybels spells Christianity D-O-N-E. Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. Jesus lived a perfect life and offers himself as a substitute for all the wrong stuff we have done. Grace is a gift we receive in faith.

So, what difference does this make in my life? Two observations come to mind from this passage. The first is the invitation to receive God’s grace in Jesus Christ. The second is to live a more grace-filled life.

This week, I came across an account of Charles Spurgeon’s experience with grace that bears repeating here. Spurgeon had a reputation in his day as being “The Prince of
Spurgeon grew up in a Christian family. His father and grandfather were both pastors. When he was 15, he had an existential crisis. He decided to visit every place of worship where he lived in Colchester, England to learn the way of salvation.

On Sunday morning January 6, 1850, he set off to hear a certain preacher recommended to him. A blinding snowstorm forced him to seek refuge in a church down a side street. He wandered into Artillery Street Primitive Methodist Church, Colchester, England. The only thing Spurgeon knew about the Primitive Methodists is that they sang so loud they made your head ache.

A dozen or so people gathered for worship that same morning. The preacher was snowed-in, so one of his elders filled in. Spurgeon remembers this thin-looking cobbler who was not very good with words or diction. It does not look very promising, does it?

This fill-in preacher read from Isaiah 45: “Look to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God and there is no other” (45:22). The elder spoke about this passage this way, “Many of you are looking to yourselves. It is no use looking there. You will never find comfort in yourselves. Look to God and be saved.”
The elder paused and pointed in the direction where Spurgeon was sitting. “Young man, you look rather miserable.” We pick up the story in Spurgeon’s own words: “Well, I did [feel miserable], but I was not accustomed to such remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance.”

The elder still did not let up: “Young man, you will always be miserable if you do not obey this text. But if you obey it now, you will be saved. Look to Jesus! Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but look and live.”

Spurgeon wrote that he did not recall another word the man said. “I was possessed with the thought of look and live. I saw at once the way of salvation. I saw what a Savior Christ was and I believed.” As Spurgeon walked home, he felt as pure and clean as the new-fallen snow. When he arrived home, his mother exclaimed, “Something marvelous has happened today.”

Look to Jesus. We have nothing to do but look and live. God offers us grace—unmerited, undeserved grace. Grace is the source of our salvation and faith is a means by which we receive it. Have you received the gift of God’s unconditional grace?

My second observation follows the first. We can never repay God for this gift of grace. Although we can never pay God back for grace, we can pay it forward. We can extend grace and mercy to other people. We can endeavor to live grace-filled lives. We could use more grace-filled churches and more grace-filled leaders. We could use more grace-filled marriages and more grace-filled families. We could use more grace-filled people.
Grace-filled people are quick to forgive and willing to let go of resentments. Grace-filled people do not lead with a critical spirit. They offer words of encouragement and extend grace to whoever needs it. When there is need for hard conversation, they do so in love and not with a harsh spirit of condemnation. Grace-filled people are not fake nice. They are willing to speak the truth in love. Grace-filled people do not pretend to have it all together. They are honest about their own sins and failures. Grace-filled people point people to the source of all grace--Jesus Christ. They love to introduce others to this One from whom all grace flows.

Receive God’s gift of grace through Jesus Christ. Seek to become grace-filled people.