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“Grace for Ourselves”

Sermon Series: “Grace Alone”

Sunday, January 13, 2008©

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Scripture Lesson: *1 Peter 2:9-10*

See yourself as God, by His grace, sees you.

The sermon this morning is about self-image. Of course self-image is a relatively new concept, only about 40 years old. Self-image is basically the picture which we have of ourselves. Psychologists tell us that we get our self-image from two places: 1) What we learn about ourselves through our own observations and expectations; and 2) the judgments of others which we internalize.

Now, self-image is very interesting because our perception of ourselves can vary wildly from how others see us. This picture is a good object lesson. It is an optical illusion from the nineteenth century. Some of you will look at this picture and see an old lady. Some of you will see a young woman. It all depends upon our perspective.



Part and parcel to self-esteem is the impact of other people's perspective on us. Do you ever find yourself wondering about what other people think about you? How you stack up in their opinion? If you have ever looked for a job, applied for admission somewhere, or even tried to get a table in a full restaurant—what someone thought about you had an effect on your life. There are, of course, those

rare times when we learn exactly what someone thinks about us—the unvarnished truth. In college I was getting ready to say hello to a friend, but through the flimsy dorm room door I could hear two people inside talking about me. So what did I do? I listened. I immediately recognized one of the voices as someone that I did not particularly care for. But I did find out we had something in common. He didn't like me either.

Now some of us may say, I don't care what other people think of me. I'm pretty fond of saying that actually. There's a word for these people. That word is fibbers. Because we cannot help but want to be liked and respected and valued. We may act like we don't care. We may put on a good front. We may not care as much as some people. But we really do. Why do we care? We care what other people think of us because it feels good when other people feel good about us. It validates who we are.

Do you ever find yourself wondering what God thinks of you? Honestly, what does God think of us? If God sat down for a primetime interview with Barbara Walters and, during the emotional high point of her twenty minutes with the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator of the universe and Father of us all, she asked him, “So what do you think of Eric Laverentz or George Smith or Sally Jones?” What would God say? Would He start off saying, “You know, of course, that I love Eric...it's just that sometimes He really disappoints me.” Then He would bite his lip,

look away from the camera as tears came to His eyes. Or would a wide smile come to His face at the very mention of your name, the kind smile we get when someone mentions our son or daughter or the love of our life. And then God would say, “I love them so much. They are perfect. They are righteous. They are holy.”

So which God do we worship here today? Which God do we find in the Bible? Do we find the God who loves us but is continually disappointed, or the God who continually delights in His sons and daughters? First Peter gives us a clue, *“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people for his own possession—called out of darkness into this marvelous light.” 1 Peter 2:9*

But before we talk about God’s opinion of us, let’s talk about the world’s opinion and how that affects us. Peter began his letter saying that he was writing to the “elect exiles” who were living scattered among the pagans of the world. Some of these Christians to whom Peter wrote lived along the Black Sea, which was one of the rougher areas of the world. Years later a Christian theologian named Tertullian described that area of the world, saying that the women did their housework while carrying around battle axes and that they ate their own people along with mutton. It was a land of rampant immorality.¹ Tertullian said there was also a phrase common to the time, “What happens in the Black Sea region, stays in the Black Sea region.” It was a rough and tumble place where these Christians lived—a place where it was easy to forget just who you were.

There is a pretty common convention in storytelling about a young man or a young woman who does not know who they are. But it turns out that they are someone pretty special, very important, with a particular job to do. Arthur was an orphan, no one particularly important until he pulled the sword from the stone. Luke Skywalker, before saving the galaxy, worked for his uncle. Harry Potter was raised by relatives who hid from him his true abilities. God works

some like this too I think. King David, before he became king, was a ruddy, skinny-armed little kid. Moses worked for his father-in-law as a shepherd. Paul tortured and killed Christians. Peter himself was just a fisherman. Even worse, given the chance he denied Christ. The world viewed all of these men in one way. It saw them one way. God made them differently.

How does the world see us and our sins? The world cannot separate us from our sins. Immanuel Kant, who is the father of Western philosophy, said that it is quite impossible for any reasonable human being to believe that we can ever escape punishment for our sins.² Do you remember what it was like to be threatened in elementary or high school with having an offense placed upon your permanent record? Nearly each of us at our job has a personnel file. For just \$39.99 on the internet, you can type in a person’s name and find out their previous phone numbers, financial information, roommates (current and previous), mother’s maiden name, education, information about their neighbors, criminal records (including speeding tickets)—all stretching back for as much 30 years. Have you ever tried typing your name into the search engine “google.” I did this a couple of years ago and I discovered if you type the name “Eric Laverentz” you find that I am unflatteringly featured in an article written by a Bible prophecy group. Based upon an eight-year-old misquotation of me in a Nashville newspaper, I am vilified as an paradigmatic advocate for secular humanism and its worst elements; extreme religious pluralism, one-world government, and cats and dogs living together in sin.

We are a society of record keepers, especially records of wrongs. We can recall with ease the sins of Benedict Arnold, Jim and Tammy Baker, Tonya Harding, O.J. Simpson, John Hinckley, Jimmy Swaggart, Britney Spears, Lee Harvey Oswald, our neighbor who lets his dog do his business in our yard, the co-worker who dismissed our idea in a meeting last week, the

college roommate who left town owing us \$120, the girl in second grade who pointed out to the teacher that our math homework was not done on time. (Her name was Cindy, by the way.) It is human nature to remember wrongs, to keep a record—especially of our own; the lies we have told, the missteps, the misstatements, the things we have stolen, the things we have withheld, the things we wish we wouldn't have done, the things we wish we were not. Those records which we keep are perfect, impeccable. They are organized, systematized and able to be recalled at a moment's notice. We keep those records very well. This is how the world sees us and unfortunately how we also see ourselves. The world's great trick is to make us believe that who we are is who it sees, rather than who God made us.

So how has God made us?

We are, when we are in Christ, part of a chosen race, a royal priesthood, God's own people called out of darkness into light. In short, God has made us holy.

The word holy tells us all we need to know about how God sees us. Holy means undefiled, unblemished, untouched, perfect, faultless, blameless, spotless, pure, set apart.

How did this happen? Because we surely know that we have not always acted holy. How did this happen?

Grace. Grace alone. *1 Peter 2:10* "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." The key word in this verse is *now*.

There is a theological idea known as the great exchange. It sounds like a pretty good movie title. But what it is, is a pretty good idea to base our life upon. The great exchange teaches that on the cross a great exchange happened. Our sins—all of them—passed to Jesus Christ and Christ's

righteousness, Christ's perfection, Christ's holiness, passed to God's children. Christ took on our burdens and brokenness, and we took on his glory and goodness.

The best way I have to explain this is about thirteen years ago I got together with a friend of mine who is a Denver Broncos fan to watch the Chiefs and the Broncos on Monday Night Football. Some of you will remember this. With less than 90 seconds left, John Elway put the Broncos ahead for what appeared to be the winning score. But instead of losing, Joe Montana took the Chiefs down the field, and with only a few seconds left, hit Willie Davis for a touchdown and the win. It is one of the greatest moments...of my life. In just a few minutes—his victory became mine. And my loss became his. His joy became mine and my despair his. In short, we changed places, in the blink of an eye. It was a great exchange...for me.

2 Corinthians 5:21 describes Christ's great exchange for us. "For our sake, he made him sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

You, me, we—sinners, broken, beaten—we are, right now, as we live and breathe, the righteousness of God by His grace.

This is the most powerful idea in the history of the world. There is no telling how many lives have been compromised, minimized and even terrorized by the inability to realize that on the cross Christ has taken our place and we have taken His. I talked with a woman several years ago who had been extremely sexually promiscuous during her teens and early 20s. She carried the burden of this evil in her person for decades. These few years made her believe that she was somehow permanently damaged, irredeemably marred. The vision of herself which she carried was so twisted and warped that when I told her she was created in the image of God, she could only cackle with a broken—almost manic—laugh of disbelief. She also claimed that

she was a believer in Jesus Christ. When I told her that when we accept God's grace in our lives, we are made new, she simply stared back at me dumbfounded. She knew by receiving Christ into her heart and accepting His grace that she would spend eternity with Him. But for her that grace did not begin in this world. The newness, she believed, would not come until all things were made new, every knee bowed, and every tongue confessed Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The idea that she was not a member of the royal priesthood, called out of darkness, was simply something which she could not accept. She saw herself as the world saw her, rather than as God made her.

Last week we said that the penalty of sin is death. One of the things this means is that to see ourselves as the world sees us, rather than as God has made us, is to die a little each day. What does this look like? It happens by degrees. Every little girl who grows up dreams of being a princess. Every little boy dreams of being a hero—for me it was winning game seven of the World Series—bases loaded, two out, two strikes and I would smack a grand slam over the center field fence. I really hoped and even believed this would happen, but summer by summer, strikeout by strikeout, that dream died. The closest I ever came to a grand slam was at Denny's. A little girl does not dream of being princess one day and fall head over heels for a failure the next. It happens by degrees. The world wears us down, dealing death to our dreams and to our spirit—until one day we don't recognize who we have become.

But day after day God lifts us up. Looking upon us with a Father's eyes. Making us rich in His grace. The only question is, do we see it? Let me return to this picture of the young woman or the old lady. The thing about this picture is that our mind only allows us to see one or the other—we can't see both at the same time. It's impossible. We must choose.

How do you see yourself? Are you essentially a sinner? Flawed? Imperfect? Broken? Or do you see yourself as God sees you? A saint, holy, flawless, the son or daughter of God? Like the picture of the old woman and young lady, we cannot see ourselves as both.

This broken world conspires to make you see your sin. But God conquered sin to secure your sainthood. When we look in the mirror who do we see? Sinner or saintly in Christ?

As I close, let me ask the question, "How do we know if we see ourselves more as sinner or saintly in Christ? How do we know if we choose death or the riches of God's grace?"

It's quite simple. We go back to *First Peter*. "*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people for his own possession—called out of darkness into this marvelous light...that you might proclaim the excellencies of him who called you.*"

If we see ourselves as God has made us, saintly rather than sinners, we cannot help but proclaim His excellencies, the wonder of Him who is rich in mercy beyond measure, the surpassing greatness of the one who has shown us grace upon grace.

And in no way do we do that more than giving grace to others. To that we will turn next week.

¹ *Tertullian, The five Books Against Maricon*, tr. Peter Holmes (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999) found in *Ante-Nicen Fathers series*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, p. 271.

² *Immanuel Kant, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1960, p. 107).