

We Can't Hear Enough About Grace

November 28-29, 1998

Rich Nathan

The Book of Ruth: Life Under God's Care Series

Ruth 2

A popular Christian author said that whenever he travels, he asks the person next to him, "What comes to mind when you hear the words 'evangelical Christian?'" He said he often hears "Republican," "right-wing," "bigoted," "homosexual basher," "homophobic," "intolerant," "angry," and "moralistic." This famous Christian author said in all the times that he has asked people what comes to mind when they hear the words "evangelical Christian" he has never heard anyone, even once, mention the word "grace."

Do you know there is a reason that people have the perception that Christians are ungracious? It is not only the result of situation comedy caricatures and secular news media bias, of which there is a lot, and misunderstandings and miscommunications – it is not for no reason that many, many people outside of the church look at Christians and would not for a moment think of the word "grace."

I don't know how many of you read the articles surrounding the murder of the homosexual young man in Wyoming. He was a fellow by the name of Matthew Shepherd. Apparently, he was a very small guy – 5'1", 5'2". He maybe weighed 120 pounds. He was a tiny little guy. Two fellows who gave him the impression that they were going to have homosexual sex with him lured him out of a bar. When he came out and they got him in their truck and they told him, "You have made a big mistake, buddy." They robbed him, tied him to a post and brutally murdered him.

Well, Matthew Shepherd's death became, as you know, a rallying point for homosexual activists. But in the midst of this politicization of a tragic death and the ensuing debates about the acceptance of homosexuality and homosexual rights, there was one particular incident that really stood out to me. At Matthew Shepherd's funeral, a small group of evangelical Christians from a Kansas church, a Baptist church I believe, traveled over to Wyoming and stood outside of the funeral with signs that read such things as:

"Matthew Shepherd is now burning in hell."

"Fags deserve to die."

Protest, if you will, that it was just a small group and the news media thoroughly tarred all Christians with this eccentric group's viewpoints. But I would suggest to you that ungrace, the opposite of grace, is a far more common mark of Christianity than we would like to admit in the church. It is not for no reason that of the many people who were surveyed by that famous Christian author regarding what came to mind when they heard the words "evangelical Christian" – not one mentioned the word "grace."

As a pastor, people send me all kinds of news items. And now with the Internet it has been easy to push a button and send reams and reams of paper to

every one that we know. And so I often receive news reports and legislative summaries from various Christian organizations. It struck me as I was preparing for today's talk that of the hundreds and hundreds of news summaries that I have received that are supposedly from a Christian perspective, I can't recall even one that was a story about grace. A story about which an undeserving person, a person who had blown it, a person who had messed up, received what they didn't deserve or earn. I can't remember one story from a supposedly Christian perspective in which a guy who should have gone to jail didn't; in which a politician who should have been punished wasn't; in which the sky didn't fall on the head of the person it should have fallen on. All of the news items that I get have a strong moral bent, a strong ethical bent, but as I thought about it in preparation for today's talk, it struck me that almost every item, without exception, could have been written by a righteous Pharisee, a person committed to uphold the law of God. But then this odd thought crossed my mind: Wasn't it the Pharisees who were the greatest opponents of Jesus? Wasn't it the Pharisees that Jesus reserved his harshest criticism for? Have we evangelical Christians actually taken what Jesus said and did and embodied and turned it on its head? Is there something wrong with the soul of Christians in America?

I rarely listen to Christian TV or radio, even though I have a radio program on every day at 2:00 p.m., because I can't bear the religious tone of much of what is on. I get cynical and judgmental when I hear or watch. I then feel guilty about getting cynical and I beat myself up for a while. And then I get judgmental again and then guilty. And so to escape from that whole cycle, I don't listen. I don't watch much Christian TV or listen to much Christian radio.

But not too long ago I succumbed to the temptation and I was listening to a particular preacher and I heard him say over and over again in the course of his message, "People in the world do such and such, but Christians do this other thing." And he kept drawing this line over and over again. People in the world act like this, but Christians act like this. About the fifth time he said that, I thought to myself, that there are only two possibilities – either this man is lying, or he is incredibly ignorant of the real condition of folks in his own church. Because if he would stop scratching the surface, just for a moment, and go lower than a millimeter deep, he would find in his own church, as I have found in our own church the Vineyard, all the same sins that you find out in the world. You find the adultery and violence, the anger, the family conflicts, the racism, the pride, the greed, the unforgiveness, the sexual abuse, the drug use, the alcoholism, the divorces, the searching of the Internet for pornography.

Friends, do you know that the major contribution that Christianity made to world religion and human consciousness – the major contribution that Christianity made was not higher ethical living or more rigorous form of behavioral codes. Christians did live on a higher ethical plane, and all the early Christians were known for living lives that were radically distant from pagan culture, but the major contribution of Christianity was not that it exceeded Phariseeism in its ethics; the major contribution of Christianity to the world consciousness was simply the word "grace." Giving people what they don't deserve, treating people better than they have earned.

The great present that God has given to us, and we in the church offer to the world, the great gift is grace. The one great gift of God that we should bow our heads for and say thank you to God on the Thanksgiving holiday is grace. And we Christians need to constantly have our thinking readjusted; get the tuner out again because we are singing off key. We need to remind ourselves, “O yeah, it is supposed to be about grace.” “Oops, I forgot.” It is grace, grace, grace. We constantly need to be recalibrated again – what is it that we are about? It is not for no reason that people don’t think of grace when they hear the words “evangelical Christian”.

A number of years ago, my son Daniel played for a traveling baseball team. It was one of these select teams. And his team played 80 games, that is 8-0 games, over the course of the season in three different states. Marlene and I drove around like idiots that summer. All we did for three months, basically, apart from work was drive to baseball games. These weren’t games in Hilliard. These were games in Toledo and the suburbs of Detroit. When you watch 80 baseball games with fifteen sets of other parents, you get to know the other people pretty well. Marlene and I used that opportunity to get to know about a dozen other families. We talked with them constantly. Since I am stuck in a church, I don’t have that much contact with folks who don’t yet know Jesus. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to be friends with people and talk with them and enjoy their company. There was another Christian family who had a son on the team. But they always sat off by themselves in a very noticeable way.

In any case, on one particular day I was getting out of my car and walking toward the ball field when one of the parents called me over and said, “Rich, come over here. I have something in my trunk.” So I walked over and he opened his trunk with a kind of grin and he had a couple of beer kegs in the back. He said, “Hey, you want a beer?” So I declined, and several of the other parents were standing around drinking beer. I talked with them for a while and then went on to the game. I completely forgot about the incident until a few days later I heard from my wife that the other Christian family was sending around a letter of protest regarding the parents who brought beer to the baseball game. They cited a particular regulation – I guess they had researched little league baseball and how there couldn’t be any alcohol within so many feet of the field. They demanded that the coach do something. Then they caught my son and lectured him about how we Christians need to take a stand against immorality. The coach finally had to call a parents’ meeting and lecture all the parents about beer drinking because the Christian family had made such a nuisance of themselves. They threatened to contact the league if stern action wasn’t taken.

And with a broken heart, after all of our investment, Marlene and I had to listen to all of these other parents muttering to each other about how they needed to beat up the religious folks. We said to ourselves: What was the point of all of that? People are driven farther from the kingdom of God. Great that you feel smug and self-righteous, but what was the point of all of that in terms of God’s passion for lost people.

Well, in the second chapter of the book of Ruth, we get another major dose of teaching about the grace of God. Lest you get weary of me teaching about

grace, let me tell you that inside of me, and inside of you if you are honest, you would see that you constantly need to be readjusted and refocused on the message of grace. Because you lose it, you forget what God is like. Because you start drawing lines between them and us. Because you forget that the great gift that Christianity offers the world is grace.

I am calling today's message, "We Can't Hear Enough About Grace." Let's pray.

We read in Ruth 2:

"Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor.' Naomi said to her, 'Go ahead, my daughter.' So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech. Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, 'The Lord be with you!' 'The Lord bless you!' they called back."

Now let me set the stage for you in case you weren't here last week. Elimelech was a man from the city of Bethlehem in Judah, who left his home because of a famine and went to a foreign land, the land of Moab, which is to the east of the Dead Sea, with his wife and two sons. He desired that his two sons would marry the two women from Moab, which was against the law of God. That's part of the price we pay when we run away from the Lord. Our kids are also affected. Some of us have experienced that in our lives, haven't we? When we have turned our backs on God – perhaps you didn't come to know Christ until your kids were older, or perhaps you knew Christ but in one or another area of your life you walked in disobedience – you see the affect on your kids. Or perhaps your parents didn't know Christ when you were a child and that has affected you. Well, Elimelech walked in disobedience to the Lord and it did negatively affect his kids. His children married women from Moab, which was directly against God's law.

This is a story about how God can redeem us even when we are disobedient. God can recover and restore. God can bring good out of the bad. Out of the stupid, self-destructive things that we have done, gracious God can still work good. He doesn't just give us what we deserve. Grace means God gives us what we don't deserve.

In this particular instance, Elimelech dies in the land of Moab with his two sons. Naomi, his widow, returns to Bethlehem with her faithful daughter-in-law, Ruth. Two women, both poor widows – an older widow and a younger widow – people who have nothing. They had no social standing, no resource, and no government program to fall back on. They had nothing going for them other than the grace of God.

That is a position that you might find yourself in today, where you have nothing to hold onto that will really make a difference in your life or in your marriage, with a child, or with a romance. No answers, no family, no counsel. You have nothing to hold onto that will really make a difference other than the

grace of God. But I will tell you, that is not a bad place to be, because God's grace alone makes all the difference.

So we read about how God provides. We read, "Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing whose name was Boaz."

That little phrase, "a man of standing" could also be translated "a man mighty in strength, a man mighty in ability, a man who is wealthy." We are talking about a guy who has all the resources. He has the social standing and the reputation. But he not only has wealth, the Hebrew word has the nuance of honor. This man Boaz was not only a wealthy man, a man with resource, but he was a man full of honor, a good man, an honorable man.

The author deliberately tells us the end of the story at the beginning. The author tells us a fact that both Ruth and Naomi are blind to, that there is this relative with lots of resource, who is a good honorable man named Boaz, and Ruth and Naomi are about to have an encounter with him. The author hints at the end of the story in verse 1. He is sort of whispering an aside from the stage, "By the way...there is this relative named Boaz that is going to figure in pretty prominently. Ruth and Naomi are not aware of this person and who he is, but listen, I will take you behind the scenes for a moment."

One of the aspects of God's grace that few of us understand well is the sovereignty of his grace. That God's grace has this aspect of God's almighty control. That God is not only a kind God, a gracious, generous, giving God who gives us what we don't deserve, but also, this same God is almighty. He exercises his grace over every atom and every square inch of the universe. We don't see God's control very well from our side. So Bible writers frequently take us behind the scenes. They take us backstage, as it were, where we can see the director and the people moving the props, the folks calling out the lines. We see the front of the stage and the Bible writers take us backstage.

Thus, to Job his trials were a mystery. He couldn't figure out what was going on. The writer of Job in the first few chapters takes us backstage to a conversation and contest between Satan and God. Job was totally unaware of it. But the writer takes us into the heavenlies and shows us what is going on. The book of Revelation does that as well. In fact, the word "revelation" literally means to disclose what was hidden, to lift the curtain. In the book of Revelation, you see the people of God being persecuted. You see this terrible attack by various governmental and religious entities on those who love the Lord. What the Bible writer does is to take you behind the scenes. He shows you what is going on in the persecution is all under God's control. There are no accidents.

Look at how this story unfolds. Ruth says, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." I am just going to go out and do the right thing, Ruth says. I am going to hit the streets and get myself a job. I am going to try to provide for you, Naomi, and for myself. Hopefully, some door will open. Hopefully, I will find favor in someone's eyes. She has no idea what God has planned.

But it says, "So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters." And here is a key phrase, "as it turned out..." By what seemed to

be the purest chance, by happenstance, she just found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, this guy that we met in verse 1, but that she had never met. God was about to give her amazing provision. She had no intention that morning, when she went out looking for food, and happened upon the field of Boaz, that she would be running into a person who would be providing for her and would eventually be her husband. That was the farthest thing from her mind – let me search out my future husband.

And to add to this series of coincidences we read, “Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, ‘The Lord be with you!’ ‘The Lord bless you!’ they called back. Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, ‘Whose young woman is that?’”

He sees Ruth. At that moment, Ruth could have gone to take a drink of water and Boaz wouldn’t have seen her. He could have arrived four hours later after Ruth returned back to Naomi. She could have been working on a different side of the field. Boaz could have delayed his trip back home. A thousand things could have occurred to prevent Boaz and Ruth meeting, but they didn’t. A thousand things could have gotten in the way – she could have worked in another field, but she didn’t. What the author is trying to communicate to us is that there are no accidents. What feels like chance, good or bad fortune and the sheerest of coincidences, is not chance. God’s people live lives that are being directed by the Lord. Over this whole story is the sovereignty of grace, or what I said last week, the providence of God. The theme of the book of Ruth is God’s providence. And by providence we mean God’s overseeing care and provision and rule over all that he has made.

People in the past actually called God “providence.” God’s over-arching care and rule and sustaining of all that he has made was so intimately tied up with how people thought of God that they actually used to call God “providence.” And when the Pilgrims came to this country, some of them migrated down to Rhode Island; they founded a town that became later the capitol of the state of Rhode Island, it is a town by the name of Providence. What providence means is that God didn’t simply wind the world up at creation and then let it go outside of his notice. The world is not just like some giant clock. You wind it up at the beginning of the day and it runs on its own, even though you don’t have your hands on it. Providence means that God continues to be actively involved in every particle of the universe, sustaining, providing, guiding. When God rested on the 7th day of creation, it didn’t mean that he went to sleep and will wake up at the end after the whole drama and history of lives unfolds. He rested from his work of creation and began his work of sustaining everything that he had made. Providence is not a general care like the government who builds roads and if you want to use them, fine. It generally provides. That is not what God’s providence means. God’s providence means particular care, particular notice upon you. Jesus said, “Even the hairs on your head are numbered.” And for some of us that job of God’s of numbering our hairs is easier than for others of us. But Jesus is teaching us that God takes particular notice and makes particular provision for us.

Now we don't often believe this. There are two other great explanations for what goes on in our life that philosophers have come up with. There are two other great alternatives to the Christian explanation of the universe; the first is chance. That what happens to us is simply a matter of coincidence, happenstance, and random events coalescing. That is sometimes what it looks like when we are slammed into by another car, or stabbed in the back by a friend or colleague by another person, a put down, a discovery of an affair, a discovery of a lump in our body, a discovery that our child has a disability or the fetus in your womb is deformed. Sometimes we opt for, "It's all blind fortune." There is no one in control.

The other great alternative is the one offered by Rabbi Kushner in his book, "Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?" One of his chapter titles is titled "There are Some Things that Even God Can't Do" and what Kushner argues for is that God is very good, he is very kind, but he is not all-powerful. He is not really in control. He can't do anything he wants. There are other actors outside his control – people, natural forces, viruses, blood clots, and computer networks. God loves us but this other stuff gets in God's way.

How do you think about life? How do you think about the various incidences of your day? You happen to meet someone in a restaurant. You happen to see someone at the gym. Someone approaches you with a request at church. Someone shares a problem with you at work. How do you think about the various incidences of your life? Chance? Fortune? Or simply the product of what people do, totally apart from God?

Friends, because of the fall, because of our inherited sinfulness and alienation from God, all of us look at the world with distorted vision. We don't interpret things correctly. We don't read the signs of the evidence of God and His providence everywhere. Every single one of us has bad vision when it comes to interpreting the events of our lives. And the only corrective for bad vision is to look at the world through the spectacles of the scriptures. You have to look at the world through the lenses of this book. And through the lenses of this book you realize that Ruth didn't just happen upon a certain field. And Boaz just didn't happen back in town. And bad things didn't just begin to happen to Job. And Jesus wasn't just tragically delivered to the cross. All of this took place according to the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God.

What does God's providence mean? When we speak of the sovereignty of grace, what does it mean for you and for me?

Number one – it means that we can be far less anxious about everything in life than we normally are. We run around fearful about the future, fearful about what is going to happen to our children, fearful if one of our kids goes on a trip, fearful about our finances, fearful about our health, fearful whether we will marry. Is there someone gracious in control or not? Is there someone to whom we can say, "Deliver us from the evil one," someone who hears our prayers and will answer them? Must we always maintain the illusion of control? Or is there someone good who is also all-powerful and actually in control?

What does providence and the sovereignty of grace mean? It means that life is not full of accidents. Not every appointment is one we would have made or

expected or wanted. But life is not full of accidents, it is full of divine appointments. Do you know how you can put yourself in a position to really be used by God? Start seeing the events of your life as divine appointments – appointments that God has made for you. A waitress comes up to you in a restaurant and instead of staring down at your menu and mumbling something, how about looking up, looking at her nametag, saying, “Hello, Rachel, how are you doing today?” while you utter a silent prayer, “Lord, is this someone that you want to reach through me? God is there something that you have for me in this restaurant beyond a 1500-calorie meal? Is there someone here – in this restaurant, this office, and factory, in my class, at this company party – is there someone here that you want to love through me? That you want to touch through me? That you want to reach through me?”

Every person I have ever met who was effective in evangelism has this broad faith, this almost intuitive sense of divine appointments. They go into situations thinking, “I am not just sitting next to this person on an airplane by accident. Sovereign God appointed them next to me. Now, Lord God, what do you want to do?”

God’s grace is not only a sovereign grace, but it is a supplying grace. Verses 5-9:

“Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, ‘Whose young woman is that?’ The foreman replied, ‘She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.’ She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.’ So Boaz said to Ruth, ‘My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.’”

Out of concern for the helpless, the poor, the stranger, God required that farmers in their own fields at harvest time and people working their own vineyards and olive groves leave a portion of their crops, including the edges of the grain fields to be collected by the needy. The reapers weren’t to go back for the grain they had missed or dropped. So in Leviticus 19:9-10 we read this: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border. Neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the sojourner. I am the Lord your God.”

People were not to gather up for themselves as much as they possibly could. And then dispense it to the poor by way of a handout. Instead, one of the marvelous ways that God shows grace to the most needy is that he provides for a way for the needy to help themselves. God knows that there is something that strips away our dignity as human beings when we simply have to rely on a handout in order to meet our basic needs. Working for our own keep is part of our created design. Before the fall of men and women, God assigned Adam and

Eve to work in the garden. The ideal state for us is not a state of idle leisure where we have things handed to us and we get to lounge around all day. That is a corruption and ultimately leads to our debasement. It strips us of what is essentially human. We need to work. We need to be productive. Tell your kids that. Say to them “I don’t want to lead to your debasement; I don’t want to strip you of your dignity; get up and wash the dishes; rake the leaves; vacuum the house; no handouts here.” Programs that are misguided attempts at grace that hand people money or hand people food without any kind of linkage to productivity actually often do more harm than good. Because in handing someone a check on a long-term continual basis – I don’t mean helping someone with an emergency need; I don’t mean when someone is in a crisis and cannot help themselves, or that there is something wrong and dehumanizing about giving them help or a hand or money – but I mean week after week handing money to the able-bodied actually results in robbing from the person so that they become enriched materially, but spiritually become poorer.

There is a wonderful book out by a man named Marvin Olasky called “The Tragedy of American Compassion.” Olasky does a lovely survey of the last 300 years of experience with the poor. And for the first 200 years America had a basically biblical perspective regarding how to assist the poor. There was a distinction drawn in American history. Up until the middle 1800’s between the impotent poor, people who were wholly incapable of working because of old age, or infancy, or sickness, or some radical disability – they were the impotent poor, the so-called helpless and the abled poor who were capable of work of some nature. To take the abled poor and hand them money and food or clothing, it was seen in American history, traditionally, that you were actually ruining that person by contributing to their disillusion. That you probably were going to be assisting that person in some kind of an addiction, in drink, drug addiction, and idleness. And taking away from them something again that is key to our dignity – our ability to be productive for ourselves.

The grace of God sometimes seems hard. For example, when the apostle Paul says to the Thessalonians, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” (1 Thessalonians 3:10) It is quite clear in contemporary society that some people have no opportunities to work. There are neighborhoods where unemployment is very high. There are places where people are not hiring. There are situations where people are discriminated against. There are classes of people who lack the skills necessary to make a living wage. God, in grace, biblically not only said to the able bodied, “You must work for your keep,” but God in his grace provided a way for people to work.

Very often in many Christian articles and books, the foot falls really hard on the poor’s need to make a way for themselves. But biblically, the foot falls equally hard on the responsibility of the wealthy to open doors for the poor to work. The Bible does not teach handouts. That is not the long-term method we ought to be employing here in the Vineyard in our ministry to the poor. But the Bible clearly teaches hand-ups and the opening of doors of opportunity to those who can’t get in the room on their own.

Thus, an addition to the law of gleanings where a person could go out and find food, God in grace also commanded the law of Jubilee. Leviticus 25 - Every fifty years all of the land in Israel went back to its original owners. And so the cycle of poverty from generation to generation was broken every two generations. It wasn't enough for God to divide the land once and to say, "Now you have all an equal opportunity. Go for it." God knew for some people because of sickness, because of differing ability, because of a lack of ambition, because of immorality, might lose their land to someone who is more ambitious, more skilled, more shrewd, more aggressive and that gradually, even if everyone started on the same footing, gradually they would grow unequal. Over time some people would amass fortunes and some people would have very little. And so God in grace said every 50 years I am going to break the cycle of poverty by giving back to the poor families their land so that they would have the means of production at their disposal. I don't simply say to the wealthy, "Out of your accumulated abundance can't you spare some change for the poor?" God says, "I call for something far more radical." The provision to the poor is the opportunity for them to help themselves.

Friends, let me share a little vision that is in my heart for our ministry to the poor long-term. I would like for us to get out of the handout business. The handout business doesn't demand enough of the poor and it doesn't demand enough of this church. It is not biblical. It is not grace. It takes people's dignity away. It doesn't help anyone long-term spiritually to simply be the recipient of charity. Long-term, the direction that our ministry to the poor needs to take is that individuals in our church become relationally connected to individuals in a poor neighborhood. That perhaps some skilled people in this church work down in the Short North helping and teaching people on how they can get a job. Here is how you interview. Here is how you dress for an interview. Here is how you speak to your employer. Here is how you show up on time. Here is what you do when you don't like something that the employer says. Here is how you keep a job. Here is when you need to go to bed in order to get up the next morning. Maybe someone here would take a risk and give someone in town a job like the Mennonite church that runs a bakery for the poor in which all employees are homeless people.

Now, that kind of provision of skills is far more demanding for us than what we have done historically. It is good to feed a person, but it is much better to assist people who can feed themselves. And God's grace is shown in this text by the provision of Boaz to Ruth and her family in allowing them to feed themselves.

And then we see, in Ruth 2 verses 10-13, God's grace is a surprising grace. "At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, 'Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me – a foreigner?' Boaz replied, 'I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.' 'May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord,' she said. 'You have given me comfort and have

spoken kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls.”

You know, one of the ways you can tell whether you are in touch with the grace of God is that you are going to say something that sounds very much like what Ruth says to Boaz in verse 10. There are two words that are going to come out of your mouth that will indicate that you understand grace. The two words are “Why me?” Verse 10, “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?” The measure of your understanding of the grace of God is revealed by your capacity to look up to the heavens and say, “Why? Why me? How did I fall into this kind of favor and grace?” David said that to the Lord. “Lord, is this the normal way that you relate? That you have treated someone like me with so much favor.” Grace means you have no sense of entitlement.

Grace, to be real, must always strike us as amazing. The most famous Christian hymn is Amazing Grace written by a man named John Newton who, at various periods of times in his life, was a slave in Western Africa and at other times he himself was a slave trader. But he found the Lord, or the Lord found him, and he became an Anglican pastor and hymn writer. When God’s saving power broke into his life, when John Newton, a former slave and slave trader, encountered the grace of God, the word that he used to describe it was “amazing” – Amazing Grace.

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now can see.”

To Ruth, Boaz’s grace was all the more amazing because she was a foreigner. She wasn’t just poor and in need, she was outside the covenant people of Israel. And you know the Bible says in Ephesians 2 that all of you who come from a Gentile background, all of you, were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenant of promise, without hope, without God, in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away, have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

God’s grace is surprising; God’s grace is amazing because God’s grace is shown to the entire world. It is not just for the Jew, but also for all the Gentiles. It is not just for natives of the Promised Land, but it is there for foreigners, for the stranger. What does this mean for us in the church? It means that God doesn’t just care about already in the church. God cares about people who are not yet in the church, people for whom church is a foreign place. The grace of God means that rather than drawing a really sharp line between the church and the world, so that we in the church can criticize the world and judge the world, and write angry e-mails and letters to each other about awful the world is – now they are serving beer at ballgames – the grace of God means that God has a heart to reach the world; to go outside of his own people.

God’s grace is a universal grace. Jews understood this because the book of Ruth has been historically read at the Feast Day of Pentecost, what the Old Testament calls the Feast of Weeks. Pentecost has not only been a harvest festival, but it is a festival in which we are reminded that God has a heart for the

world. The harvest God desires is a harvest of people—rich people, poor people, down and outers, up and outers—people who don't know where their next meal is coming from and people who are stuffed in Thanksgiving food but whose souls are empty. God cares about the church goer and the non-church goer. God cares about the people everyone likes and no one likes -- the unpopular, the sick, and the elderly in a nursing home.

Now, Ruth was a woman who knew how to respond to God's surprising grace. The fact that God's grace is so amazing, so surprising didn't paralyze Ruth. Look at this wonderfully balanced statement of hers in verse 13: "May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my Lord," she said. "You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls."

Here is a perfectly balanced, perfectly pure response to the surprising, amazing grace of God. We experience the grace of God in a certain area of our lives. Over Thanksgiving you might have taken time to count your blessings. You look back on the year and say, "God, this has been a good year. You have blessed my family." He might have healed someone.

Perhaps this year you might have had a new baby born in your home. Maybe you had a new grandchild. Perhaps this past year, God opened a door for a more fulfilling job. Perhaps this past year you found a lover. You got engaged or married, or God was with you in a time of great loss and difficulty. Perhaps over Thanksgiving, you like me counted your blessings. You said, "Lord, why me? I don't know why you have been so good." As a church, God has been great to us this year; so many conversions; so many testimonies; so much provision by the building campaign.

But where do you go from there? A person who knows the grace of God, as Ruth knew Boaz's grace and saw the heart of Boaz, a person who knows the grace of God says, "May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord? Give me more grace." We recognize that God is not stingy, having given to us, he doesn't clutch his hand and say, "That's enough. Run along on your way. You have gotten enough. Things have gone well." God doesn't treat us like the orphanage head in Oliver, when the orphan Oliver comes up and asks for more food and yells "More? More?" We ask for more grace by continuing to be in a humble posture before the Lords saying, "I don't have the standing of one of your servant girls."

For Ruth the ax falls exactly straight, true and clean. She is bold, and yet humble. She asks for more, but recognizing that she has no claim on anything. That she has no right to any favor. She doesn't deserve it.

Last thought: God's grace is a super abundant grace. Read verses 14-21, "At mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.' When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, 'Even if she gathers among the sheaves, don't embarrass her. Rather, pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her.' So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted

to about an ephah. She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough. Her mother-in-law asked her, 'Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!' Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. 'The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz,' she said. 'The Lord bless him!' Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. 'He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.' She added, 'That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers.' Then Ruth the Moabitess said, 'He even said to me, 'Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.'"

By super abundant, I mean that grace goes beyond any kind of expectation or mathematical formula. Boaz, merely by law, was required to leave the edges of his field unreaped so that the poor could go through and glean the edges of his fields. By law, he simply wasn't to go through and reap everything. But Boaz goes beyond law. He feeds Ruth out of his own provision and then he tells the men, "Even if she gathers among the sheaves [that is the stuff that was already harvested] don't embarrass her." Be tender with her. Preserve this poor woman's dignity. In fact, pull out some of the stuff you have already harvested and leave it for her so that she can pick it up. Beyond law – this was so much abundance that she hauls home an ephah of barley.

I can picture this young widow dragging home to her mother-in-law this huge sack of food. Grace goes beyond law. It goes beyond mathematics. Grace is Jesus saying just don't forgive seven times, but seventy times seven. Grace is the good shepherd leaving the 99 and going after the one. Grace is Jesus going after people who are failures, who turn their back on God and who haven't lived life the right way, who messed up big time. Those who walked away from commitments, walked away from covenants. Whenever you think of the word grace, you need to tack on super abundant, extravagant.

That is the gift that the Christian church offers the world. We don't offer the world a mathematical formula, measuring out to each exactly what they deserve. We don't offer the world radical scrupulousness, insistence upon how they deal, we must be scrupulous in our dealings. We must be fair. We must be honest. We must deal correctly. But what we offer the world and each other is super abundant grace. We Christians are a people who have not been treated as we deserve and so we are going to give to others what they don't deserve—unearned favor. **Grace.** And you just can't hear enough about grace. Let's pray.

