



---

# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## The Other Amazing Grace

---

SERMON BY DR. DOUG PRATT ■ JANUARY 8, 2012

---

### COMMUNION MEDITATION

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup>But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:43-45, NIV)*

#### **The Goodness of Life**

Commercials and advertisements have become an inescapable blight on American television and print media. Many of them are irritating, or forgettable; but occasionally one sticks in your mind. Several years ago I saw an ad for a brand of instant coffee. The scene opens in a homey, tastefully-decorated living room. A couple is sitting together on a comfortable couch, reading. The wife reaches over and squeezes her husband’s hand. “What are you thinking?” he asks her. She smiles and says, “I was just thinking about how good life is.” It was a touching, genuine scene of domestic happiness. And then the husband gets up and says, “I think I’ll make some Taster’s Choice coffee.” It wrecked the whole mood. But that simple scene has stuck with me—and especially the words “I was just thinking about how good life is.”

That’s what I want us to consider together today: the goodness of life. God has filled our world and our days with countless good things: blessings large and small, riches and benefits beyond what we can count. They are all from Him, our Creator and Savior and Lord, and we can never deserve them and never repay them.

God's goodness to us is seen in the commonplace things in life—the things it is so easy to take for granted. Think of the brilliant canvas of colors in a sunset—for surely God could have made this world just black and white, colorless. Think of the pleasures of food and drink, the delightful sense of taste—for God didn't need to give us taste buds for us to survive; they're not essential ... just delightful bonuses, so that food not only keeps us alive but brings us joy. Think of the bliss of sleep, the opportunity each night to close out the world and wake up 7 or 8 hours later feeling refreshed. God could have made us to not need sleep, but what a pleasure we would have been deprived of. Think of the magic of music and ears to hear it—how cold life would be if there were no sound!

We could go on all day if we wanted to, listing all the things in this world that are good and pleasurable. Has God been good to Planet Earth and its inhabitants? You'd better believe it—astoundingly good, undeservedly gracious to us. We have so much.

And for those of us who are Christians, the list of things in the natural world to be thankful for is dwarfed by the catalog of spiritual blessings that are ours. We have a guarantee of eternal life, with the Spirit of God Himself dwelling within us as the down payment. We have total and complete forgiveness for all our sins. We have a purpose in living, a peace about the future, a joy that can't be shaken, and a love with one another, that those who aren't yet Christians cannot understand. My brothers and sisters, we are all so rich. And I'm not talking about our finances, though most of us have far more than our basic survival needs met. Our material wealth is insignificant compared to the spiritual wealth we have because we belong to Jesus Christ.

Of course, life on earth can, at times, be unpleasant and difficult and painful and challenging. There's no question that this is not a perfect world. We all know it. For some of us it's been a tough week, and for some of us the last twelve months constituted a tough year. The Bible is very honest and realistic about the fact that this is a fallen, imperfect place. Sin and sorrow, disease and death have temporarily disfigured

the perfection of God's original creation. My guess is that there is at least one person here who is so deeply discouraged and depressed about the problems they're facing that they're on the brink of giving up.

But please lift your eyes with me for a moment. No matter what sort of difficulty you're in, there are still so many good things to be thankful for. No one's life is 100% pain and sadness. Even in the tough times—illness, unemployment, family conflict, divorce or loss—we still have more good things than bad. And as Christians, we always have the light of God's love and His presence with us to brighten up the darkest days.

### **Common Grace and Special Grace**

Our scripture text is Matthew 5:43-45. These words address the context of loving our enemies. And as a comparison, Jesus comments in verse 45 about God's gracious, forgiving and merciful love and goodness to all of us human beings. The obvious implication: Sometimes *we* act as if we are God's enemies. We do that whenever we sin, or hurt another person, or violate God's sacred and good commandments (which He gave us for our happiness, not to spoil our fun). And yet He keeps giving to us indiscriminately—"the evil and the good ... the righteous and the unrighteous" among us.

Many people have the self-centered and distorted attitude that God owes them. They think they have some sort of right to a happy, prosperous, pain-free, successful, healthy life of 80 or 90 years on this earth. And if anything goes wrong, they feel cheated and direct the blame towards God. But if we step outside our egocentric little universes and look at things the way they really are, we realize that God doesn't owe us anything. We have all ignored Him and disobeyed Him. We don't deserve His kindness and mercy.

But how does God respond to our rebellion and sin? With grace. With lavish gifts that none of us could ever earn or deserve. The sun and the rain and all the good things of life are given freely to both believers and non-believers. This is what theologians call "Common Grace" or "Universal Grace." Common Grace describes all the bless-

ings God gives to the planet earth and its inhabitants—especially us human beings. It is distinguished from the other kind of grace, known as “Special Grace” or “Saving Grace,” which comes to all who willingly place their faith in the Lord. But “Common Grace” is every bit as amazing, staggering, wonderful and merciful as “Saving Grace.”

Every good thing in life comes from God alone. Even the talents and abilities of God’s enemies, who curse Him or deny He exists, actually come from His gracious hand. Of course, not all great artists, athletes, musicians, and geniuses recognize the true Source of their blessings.

This is the central theme of the movie that came out a number of years ago called *Amadeus*, about the life of Wolfgang Mozart. From all accounts, Mozart was a real jerk, but he was also a greatly gifted musician. And it infuriated the jealous court composer Salieri, who envied the young man’s abilities. The same is true today: God has given some amazing gifts to people, even though some of those individuals don’t give back to Him the praise and thanks He is due.

But when we listen to great music, or cheer star athletes, or admire works of art or enjoy outstanding fiction, we should give praise not just to the human beings who produced those great accomplishments but also to God who made them possible. He is such an extravagant Creator! How wonderful are His works, including the works He accomplishes through human agents.

### **Our Response to God’s Graces**

If we truly understand how much God has blessed us, what should be the proper response? We should all be unendingly grateful to our Heavenly Father. Unfortunately, for all we have, we do not seem to be an especially thankful and grateful people. Our modern society seems to be oriented less towards contentment and thankfulness than it is to wanting and needing and demanding ever more. Constant comparison and competition with others leaves us feeling that we don’t measure up or wanting more. If 90% of our life is going well and 10% isn’t, what do we tend to focus on? Usually the 10% (with which we’re *not*

satisfied). We take for granted the good things and complain or whine about the bad.

What we need from time to time is a little “attitude adjustment.” The choice we can make today and tomorrow is to be grateful and thankful, and to recognize and acknowledge the Lord as the source of all of the good things of life. Being grateful is not dependent on our outer circumstances. It comes from within. It’s a decision you have the freedom to make every single day. I’ve been encouraged to re-examine my own attitude by a story I came across recently, written by an American missionary to Brazil named Hope McDonald.

Hope tells of a Brazilian woman named Jesse she had come to know and had the privilege of leading to faith in Christ. Jesse was 37 (though she looked to be about 70); her life had been physically hard. She lived in poverty, caring for her husband and eight children in a little 3-room house. One day Hope went to visit Jesse, and found her looking weary and exhausted. Six days earlier her widowed sister from the north had moved in with her, along with her six kids. All the children had come down with cases of trench mouth, and soon Jesse’s kids were sick as well. Trying to care for 17 people under one roof, including all the sick children, was an overwhelming task.

“Jesse, how are you doing? How are you making it?” Hope asked.

Her response was unforgettable. “My body is tired. But right here in my heart everything is full of peace. I get up each morning at 4:30, before anyone else is awake. I come outside and sit and look up to heaven and pray, and I thank God for all His many blessings to me. And that’s what gets me through the day.”

The missionary was amazed, and wrote: “With the helplessness of that situation, I couldn’t see even one blessing. But she had a whole list.” That, my friends, is an example of a grateful heart. How thankful and grateful, this day and every day, should you and I be—for all our blessings that come from the “other amazing grace”?

## Giving Thanks

As we approach this table to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, consider this: In many Christian traditions this sacrament is called **The Eucharist**. “Eucharist” is the ancient biblical word meaning “give thanks.” A spirit of thankfulness, of gratitude, is what brings us to this table — thanking God for all of His amazing graces, those in the natural world of Common Grace and those Special Graces that are ours through faith. So as we gather at this table, may a spirit of Eucharist, of thankfulness, fill every one of our hearts today.

