**Round Top Church Christian Fellowship**

**Sermon**

***Ekklesia***

 ***God’s Grace Saves from the Beginning***

 **December 2, In the Year of Our Lord 2018**

 **Pastor Matthew Diehl**

**(Unless otherwise noted, NAU text is quoted)**

Last Sunday, we spoke about God’s grace and love as foundational pillars of the church. We know that the definition of grace is unmerited favor. It is sad that this definition has to be repeated after thousands of years of God’s witness to us. This continued diligence is due to many people who are under erroneous information and leadership without biblical support, that salvation, the retention of salvation and forgiveness, is tied to their meritorious works to earn God’s grace, love and forgiveness. The Bible is God’s irrefutable testimony to us. There isn’t any religious body or council that is higher in authority. God’s grace and love have been here and at work from the beginning. From a biblical perspective, that means Genesis 1. The age of grace is constant from the beginning.

God did not partially dispense grace and love from the beginning. Meaning that He did not hold back extending His grace, love, forgiveness, patience, and other attributes from people. Adam and Eve did not earn to be placed in the Garden with all the provisions present to sustain life. Garden life was unmerited favor. Garden life was God extending His grace to them. Garden life was a sinless life. Adam and Eve, before the fall, lived sinless lives. This was possible, because God created and extended the Garden’s sin-free environment to them. They lived in a state-of-salvation due to God’s grace. Again, unmerited favor, grace was extended to Adam and Eve from the beginning.

 When Adam and Eve sinned and ate from the forbidden tree and when Cain murdered Abel, God did not extract their earthly lives from them. God extended His grace to them and gave them another opportunity. Yes, they had to live with the earthly consequences of their decisions. Sin is that way. God extends His grace, love and forgiveness, but the sin we commit has consequences that will follow us here on earth. Adam and Eve had to live outside the presence of God that they had enjoyed in the Garden. Cain wandered the earth as a vagrant, but he still had to live his life here on this earth.

God told Adam that he would die in Genesis 2:17, if he ate from the forbidden tree. Obviously, Adam did not die physically, but he did die spiritually. Separation from God is death. Adam and Eve were removed from the Garden where they had enjoyed a closeness to God that no other people would ever experience.

 24 So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis. 3:24)

 Cain is fearful that others will know that he murdered his brother Abel and kill him for his capital crime (Genesis 4:14). However, God appointed a sign for Cain so no one would kill him. Again, God did not punish Cain by taking his life. Grace was extended. Cain had to walk about the earth with death hanging over his head.

 Paul explains this walking-dead reality in his letter to the saints in Ephesus. Reading Paul’s words presents the reality that people who have not surrendered to God are walking-dead people. There is T.V. series called The Walking Dead that portrays life in the months and years that follow a zombie apocalypse. The people who have not turned into zombies are constantly on the move in search of a safe haven from the zombies. I do not watch this zombie mind-drumming epic, but it is a view of people walking around the earth that have been greatly diminished who live an existence, just not as originally intended.

 Paul is not light in the use of words. Think about the implications of Paul’s words which is what God directed him to write and is Scripture. People outside the Church live in a dead state. This is a spiritual death. They physically live but are spiritually dead. And who is their boss? The prince of the power of the air (Satan) who is a spirit and works in the sons of disobedience. This portrays a graphic spiritual war that is constantly ongoing. Anyone who looks at the world objectively through a spiritual lens can see this battle raging every day in the six-o-clock news.

 **Ephesians 2:1** And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,

 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

 However, there is hope. Adam had hope. Cain had hope. Why is there hope for those who rebelled against God and committed murder? Ephesians 2:4-7 declares. . .

 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,

 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus,

 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

 So, mercy and grace were extended to Adam and Cain. Was not mercy and grace also extended to David after he had Bathsheba’s husband killed? **Psalm 51** is God’s witness to us that His grace and mercy are extended to a contrite heart. David calls for God to be gracious according to His lovingkindness and compassion.

Be **gracious** to me, O God, according to Your **lovingkindness**; According to the greatness of Your **compassion** blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity And cleanse me from my sin. (Psalm 51:1-2)

 From these three biblical accounts, we can see that God’s grace, mercy, love and forgiveness were extended to man and operational for thousands of years before God incarnated himself as Jesus. Thus, God worked through Believers in dispensing His eternal attributes. Yes! Love, grace, mercy and forgiveness are eternal and transcend to the next life. The Church exists to exhibit these eternal attributes of God. Man does not the originator of God’s eternal attributes. We know that God, not man, through His Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:11). Man receives and witnesses this ministry of God. Believers are cumulatively the Church. They are many spiritual lights coming together in a community that once joined are brighter than any one that stands alone. This is why it is important for Believers to come together and be seen, to give an account of God working in their lives. The community takes notice.

 One of the major lessons we receive from knowing that God’s eternal attributes of grace, mercy and love were functioning from the beginning is that God saves people the same way. God justifies Abel to Him the same as He did Paul, or Peter, or you and I. There isn’t any different path to salvation. There is confusion in the church from time-to-time. The Law is viewed by some as the mechanism God used in the Old Testament to save people. This is not true. Paul is clear in Galatians 3:5-9.

 5 So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? 6 Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. 7 Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. 8 The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

Galatians 3:16-25

16 Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ.

 17 What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.

 18 For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.

 19 Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.

 20 Now a mediator is not for one *party only*; whereas God is *only* one.

 21 Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.

 22 But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

 23 But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed.

 24 Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.

 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

**In addition, Hebrews 10:**

**Hebrews 10:1** For the Law, since it has *only* a shadow of the good things to come *and* not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near.

 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?

 3 But in those *sacrifices* there is a reminder of sins year by year.

 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Hebrews 10:1-4)

 **End of the 1st century.**

At the end of the 1st century, Believers had expanded into many countries and cultures. John was the last person who wrote about Jesus that actually saw and witnessed Him. John is believed to be responsible for five New Testament books: John the Gospel, 1, 2, and 3 John and The Revelation. Through these books (letters), we can see the maturity of the message since Jesus ascended to Heaven. In addition, all of the 27 books of the New Testament had been written and in circulation.

 There are a few historical events that took place in the 1st century after Jesus ascended to heaven. The most impactful was the destruction of Jerusalem along with the Temple (66-70 A.D.) The last Jewish stronghold was defeated at Masada by 73 A.D. The Jewish landscape had changed dramatically. The Jewish state, even though Roman occupied, had been dismantled and utterly destroyed. There wasn’t any more Jewish Temple leadership with which to contend. However, the Roman Government oppressed any group that was perceived to be a threat to the empire. At times, those that followed Jesus came under the Roman eye and suffered persecution. We know that Emperor Nero blamed Christians for the fire which burned a large portion of the city. Despite Roman persecution, Believers persisted and many came to surrender to God under the teachings of Jesus as taught by the Disciples and handed to other Believers.

John, being one of the last eye-witnesses, was instrumental in ministering to the churches in Asia Minor (Turkey). When he writes to the seven cities in Revelation, those saints in the cities named know who John is. The fact that there were so many converted to this perceived new faith is a testimony to the power of God’s Holy Spirit working in the hearts of people. They were willing to risk their lives, and the Roman records record their martyrdom. See Tacitus and others. These accounts are well known. Feeding Christians to wild beasts and setting them on fire is common historical knowledge. Again, it is a miracle that the faith known as Christianity survived.

 The theology, the teaching that passed onto the next generation of people, survives to this day in the 27 letters we know as the New Testament. The next group of people are known as the Church Fathers. Some historians divide this group into two: The Church leaders before the Nicaea Council in 325 are Ante-Nicene Fathers and those on that date and after are referred to as Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. https://www.ccel.org/fathers.html

**Ante-Nicene Fathers**

***The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325***

[Volume I.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.html)   The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus

Clement of Rome, Mathetes, Polycarp, Ignatius, Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus.

[Volume II.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf02.html)   Fathers of the Second Century

Hermas, Tatian, Theophilus, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria

[Volume III.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.html)   Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian

Three Parts: I. Apologetic; II. Anti-Marcion; III. Ethical

[Volume IV.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04.html)   The Fathers of the Third Century

Tertullian Part IV; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen

[Volume V.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.html)   The Fathers of the Third Century

Hippolytus; Cyprian; Caius; Novatian; Appendix

[Volume VI.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf06.html)   The Fathers of the Third Century

Gregory Thaumaturgus; Dinoysius the Great; Julius Africanus; Anatolius and Minor Writers; Methodius; Arnobius

[Volume VII.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.html)   The Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries

Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, Liturgies

[Volume VIII.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf08.html)

The Twelve Patriarchs, Excerpts and Epistles, The Clementia, Apocrypha, Decretals, Memoirs of Edessa and Syriac Documents, Remains of the First Ages

[Volume IX.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf09.html)   Recently Discovered Additions to Early Christian Literature; Commentaries of Origen

The Gospel of Peter, The Diatessaron of Tatian, The Apocalypse of Peter, The Visio Pauli, The Apocalypses of the Virgin and Sedrach, The Testament of Abraham, The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena, The Narrative of Zosimus, The Apology of Aristides, The Epistles of Clement (Complete Text), Origen's Commentary on John, Books I-X, Origen's Commentary on Mathew, Books I, II, and X-XIV

[Volume X.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf10.html)   Bibliographic Synopsis; General Index [not reproduced]

**Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers *Series I***

***St. Augustine Volumes***

[Volume I.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf101.html)   Prolegomena: St. Augustine's Life and Work, Confessions, Letters

[Volume II.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.html)   The City of God, Christian Doctrine

[Volume III.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf103.html)   On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises

[Volume IV.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf104.html)   The Anti-Manichaean Writings, The Anti-Donatist Writings

[Volume V.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf105.html)   Anti-Pelagian Writings

[Volume VI.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106.html)   Sermon on the Mount, Harmony of the Gospels, Homilies on the Gospels

[Volume VII.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf107.html)   Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies

[Volume VIII.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf108.html)   Expositions on the Psalms

***St. Chrysostom Volumes***

[Volume IX.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf109.html)   On the Priesthood, Ascetic Treatises, Select Homilies and Letters, Homilies on the Statutes

[Volume X.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf110.html)   Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew

[Volume XI.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf111.html)   Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans

[Volume XII.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf112.html)   Homilies on First and Second Corinthians

[Volume XIII.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf113.html)   Homilies on the Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon

[Volume XIV.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf114.html)   Homilies on the Gospel of St. John and the Epistle to the Hebrews

**Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers *Series II***

[Volume I.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.html)   Eusebius: Church History from A.D. 1-324, Life of Constantine the Great, Oration in Praise of Constantine

[Volume II.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf202.html)   Socrates: Church History from A.D. 305-438; Sozomenus: Church History from A.D. 323-425

[Volume III.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf203.html)   Theodoret, Jerome and Gennadius, Rufinus and Jerome

[Volume IV.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.html)   Athanasius: Select Writings and Letters

[Volume V.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf205.html)   Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises; Select Writings and Letters

[Volume VI.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.html)   Jerome: Letters and Select Works

[Volume VII.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.html)   Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen

[Volume VIII.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf208.html)   Basil: Letters and Select Works

[Volume IX.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf209.html)   Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus

[Volume X.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.html)   Ambrose: Select Works and Letters

[Volume XI.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf211.html)   Sulpitius Severus, Vincent of Lerins, John Cassian

[Volume XII.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212.html)   Leo the Great, Gregory the Great

[Volume XIII.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf213.html)   Gregory the Great II, Ephriam Syrus, Aphrahat

[Volume XIV.](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.html)   The Seven Ecumenical Councils

 When a person comes across references in Christian literature, names like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Cyprian, St. Augustine and St. Chrysostom will be found in this list. These men God used to forward the faith. This is a most formative time for the Church. The New Testament cannon was tested time and time again. There were many attempts to get additional letters circulated as authoritative. Many of these writings are known as pseudepigrapha writings. “Pseudo” meaning false. This is where letters like the Gospel of Thomas and others are circulated. These were attempts by false teachers, false groups, like the Gnostics to gain traction among the people. This is much like the Book of Mormon today. These “Fathers” constantly quoted from the letters we know as the New Testament. In addition, there were songs derived from the New Testament letters that were circulated. It is a miracle that we have the 27 letters-books of the New Testament. People who attack the legitimacy of the New Testament are really publicizing their rebellion toward God. It is fair to objectively ask questions and seek through heart-felt inquiry. God does not want us to be uninformed.

Some people who make wholesale rejections of the New Testament or the Bible as a whole body of work are those that have been damaged by someone who claimed to be a Christian. This includes those false religious leaders who hold-up the Bible and use it for their dictatorship and are false witness. Unfortunately, their victims reject them and the Bible. We need to be in prayer for their hearts to be opened to a loving presentation of God’s Word.

Others reject the Bible, because it interferes with their evil plans. They then dismiss the Bible as irrelevant because of faulty translations and printing errors. We have reported time and time again here that there are now over 6000 Greek New Testament witnesses to the 27 letters. These witnesses are whole and in part. None of the witnesses contradict the Incarnation, Ministry of Jesus, including the miracles, the arrest, trial, crucifixion, the empty tomb, and ascension of Jesus. If you have anyone tell you that the Bible is not reliable, please ask them to visit with me. They may not leave professing Christ, but they will leave knowing the facts which highlight the Bible’s reliability. It will come down to them simply making a more informed decision which is their right.

 There were, as is today, substantial issues and challenges facing the 1st Century Church transitioning into the 2nd Century. John wrote the book of Revelation in the last decade of the 1st century before the year 100 A.D. Many of us have read or are familiar with the first few chapters of the book: the well-known warnings (one Praise) to the seven churches in Asia Minor being Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. It is noted that the church in Philadelphia received a praise and not a warning. It is not a stretch to label the concerns addressed to the churches in Asia Minor as the transitional issue of the day. In fact, these are transitional issues that are challenged to convey the Gospel to the next generation throughout the ages. We have the same today as the Church did over nineteen-hundred years ago.

**To the Church in Ephesus Revelation 2:4**

4 'But I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love.

 **To the Church in Smyrna Revelation 2:8-11**

 8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

 9 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

 10 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

 11 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'

**To the church in Pergamum Revelation 2:12-16**

 12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:

 13 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

 14 'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit *acts of* immorality.

 15 'So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

 16 'Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.

**To the church in Thyatira Revelation 2:18-21**

 18 "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this:

 19 'I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first.

 20 'But I have *this* against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit *acts of* immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.

 21 'I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality.

**To the church in Sardis Revelation 3:1-3**

**Revelation 3:1** "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

 2 'Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. 3 'So remember what you have received and heard; and keep *it*, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.

 **To the church in Philadelphia Revelation 3:7-8**

(God did not have something against.)

 7 "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this:

 **8 'I know your deeds**. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name.

 **To the Church in Laodicea Revelation 34:14-17**

14 "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: 15 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. 16 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. 17 'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked,