



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA

By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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John 1:14-18

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English Standard Version

“The Grace of Christ”

This is the 4th sermon in the series on the New Testament book of John entitled,
“The Gospel of Christ.”

John 1:14-18

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 (John bore witness about Him, and cried out, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because He was before me.’”) 16 And from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, He has made Him known.”

INTRODUCTION: *People don’t always understand us!*¹

One of my favorite preachers is Will Willimon. He’s a Methodist Bishop. He used to be the Dean of the Chapel at Duke. And he’s a guy with whom I would have a lot of disagreements with over all kinds of theological stuff. But I love to read his stuff, because he’s a professional smart-aleck ... and I’m jealous ... cuz’ I want to be a professional smart-aleck. I just can’t think of really good responses quick enough. Unless of course you’re an elder here ... then you’ll get nailed pretty regularly.

Anyway, when I was researching my dissertation I came across this interview with Will Willimon that I just loved. It was conducted by *Leadership Journal* and the editors of that magazine asked the good Dr. Willimon a bunch of questions and I want you to listen to his response:

¹ The introduction is adapted from the article, “Pumping Truth in a Disinclined Age,” interview with William Willimon, *Leadership Journal*, Spring 1990, pages 128-137.

Q: How should today's preachers address the modern world?

I've decided the Bible doesn't necessarily want to address the modern world; it wants to create a whole new world that cannot be seen without conversion. And so, if some people don't understand me when I speak as a Christian communicator, that's okay. It doesn't mean they're unintelligent or evil. It probably means they're not in that new world yet, and they haven't learned the language of salvation. As a Christian communicator, I need to give people credit for not understanding me.

Q: You don't want people to understand you?

No, not that. But I recognize that they may not understand the Christian message right away. If my message were that Christianity is basically about being a nice person and being sensitive to the needs of others and being open-minded and affirming, they could understand that. Anybody who'd reject that is a fool, because then we're not talking about special revelation; we're just talking about being reasonable and open and American.

But true Christianity—the Bible—says there are good reasons for not believing it [that Christianity is about being nice and sensitive and open-minded and affirming]. I mean, [Christianity] is odd. It's against the grain. It's countercultural, always about the displacement of an old world order with a new one. No wonder people walk away in confusion.

The gospel accounts strain to describe what happened, but don't make any mistake about it, they're trying to describe something unearthly: death working backward. "So I can't talk about 'the eternal rebirth of hope,' or 'Jesus living on in our hearts.' We're talking about a dead Jew, crucified, who came back to harass us. And it scares the heck out of us!"

Q: Many preachers try to make Christianity a reasonable option.

You're doing just the opposite...

I've tried it both ways. The first approach—that Christian commitment is reasonable—is dangerous. If I don't watch myself, I'll reduce Christianity to merely being a good person, someone who's good for society. But Christianity demands much more. A good question to ask at the end of any sermon is, "Would they have killed Jesus for this?" Not all of my sermons stand up to that question; the death of Jesus would seem incomprehensible over some of the bland stuff I've preached. People would be more apt to make Jesus president of a university or a speaker for a weekend conference. But no, people had good reason to crucify Jesus. They recognized in him a threat to the world as it was constituted, and he continues to be a threat.

Q: Is the resistance to the gospel more intellectual or emotional?

We take a distinctively wrong turn when we make Christianity into a kind of intellectual dilemma. It's more a practical problem, a problem of living.

One student, now in graduate school in Chicago, was telling me he's losing his faith. I asked him, "What is the faith you're losing?"

He said, "I don't believe in the virgin birth anymore."

"So what? You don't believe in virginity, period! You mean I'm supposed to be upset over your intellectual questions? You're 19 years old; there's a lot you don't know yet. Why don't you just wait a while to see how your doctrine works out?"

Then he asked a good question: "Why do you have to swallow stuff like this to be a Christian?"

"Well," I said, "We ask you to believe in the virginal conception of Jesus and, if we can get you to swallow that without choking, then there's no telling what else we can get you to believe. Come back next week and we'll try to convince you that the poor are royalty and the

rich are in big trouble, that God, not the nations, rules the world, and on and on.

You see, we start you out on the **small** stuff like the virgin birth and the inerrancy of Scripture. When we get you to believe these **easy** things, then you're ready for the tougher demands of Christianity, which are not so much intellectual as practical: How do I live this faith? What does the lordship of Christ mean in my life?"

Q: Are you saying we should or should not preach about behavior?

I'm for saying less to some of these issues and more for getting straight who we are and how odd it is to follow Jesus.

One reason the world ignores Christians is because it rarely hears anything from us it cannot hear from Dear Abby. I've met people who've given up on us because we're bland.

I believe the gospel is true and that it's a marvelous thing to give your life to. I try to say: "All right, folks, just for this morning, let's all trust this Word from God more than we trust our feelings or our experience. The gospel isn't trying just to explore your experience but to engender a new experience. It's trying to take you someplace you've never been. Let's see where that takes us."

And, believe it or not, I find that attitude pretty refreshing.

And I thought of that interview because of today's passage. Because today's passage is doing exactly that ... trying to take you someplace you've never been.

So let's see where that takes us.

And since we're being unconventional today, we're not going to follow the verses in order, and we're going to skip one of them ... so you'll have to listen carefully ... and see what happens.

We're going to start, very briefly, at the last verse in the passage ...

v. 18: NO ONE HAS SEEN GOD²

What fools we can make of ourselves by denying what we cannot see. So John poses a problem when says in verse 18, "*No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known.*"

And the problem he poses is this: If you can't see God, how can you know Him? After all, God is invisible. And that's the **problem** — that's the **question** — that John sets out to **answer** in the rest of this passage.

And the first part of the answer comes when ...

v. 17: GOD REVEALED HIMSELF IN THE LAW

God revealed Himself in the Law of Moses **before** He revealed Himself in the Lord Jesus. This is found in verse 17. Let's read it, "*For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*"

Does that mean that the Law of Moses is contrary to grace and truth — that the law is not gracious and not truthful? I don't think so. What verse 17 says is that before the **reality** of grace and truth came through Jesus, a **witness** to that reality came through the Law of Moses.

The reason I don't think verse 17 intends to make a sharp contrast between the Law of

² Exposition of the text is adapted from the sermon "*The Word Became Flesh*" by John Piper, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, 12/24/89, www.DesiringGod.org; *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary* by James Montgomery Boice, pages 52-76; the sermon "*The Stranger from Galilee*" by Ray Stedman, Peninsula Bible Church, 4/10/83, www.pbc.org; *That You May Believe* by Joseph "Skip" Ryan, pages 43-51.

Moses and Jesus is what the Apostle John says about Moses and the law in other places. For example, in **John 3:14-15** he says, *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.”* Here Moses does something gracious and truthful that points to the grace and truth of Jesus.

Another example is **John 5:46-47** where Jesus says, *“If you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?”* Here Moses is in total harmony with Jesus and writing truth about Jesus and His grace.

Finally in **John 6:32**, *“Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven.”* This means that the manna in the wilderness was a gracious gift of God, but it was **not** the true bread. It was a means of grace, but not the **reality** of grace itself. It was a **witness** to the grace to come, a foretaste of Christ.

So John's point in verse 17, *“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”* is that the law was **not** the reality of grace and truth themselves, **Jesus** was. The law was a witness to grace and truth. Jesus was the **fulfillment**, not the replacement, of the Law of Moses.

The Law makes demands. It's hard, cold, unyielding, without mercy. What John is saying in this section is that law is the demand, but grace and truth are the supply ... designed to meet that demand. Many people think that law and grace are contradictory, that they are opposing principles. But not in the sense in which they were originally intended. Law and grace supplement one another. Law makes its demands, rightfully and justly, and no one can meet them, but grace and truth is given in order to meet that demand.

In Exodus 20 there is the remarkable account of the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai; the Law, which came with smoke, thunder, earthquake, fire, fear and trembling. But in **the very next section** we read the detailed plans for the building of the tabernacle -- God's provision to meet the demands of the Law.

First, God is invisible. Second, God revealed Himself in the Law of Moses before He revealed Himself in the Lord Jesus. And third ...

v. 14: GOD BECAME MAN AND LIVED WITH US

The verse contains something that was new and quite startling when it was first written, and yet for us who read it nearly two thousand years later it has become commonplace. We read, *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

This was the great sentence for which the Gospel of John was written. It tells us— inexplicable and mysterious as it may be—that God became man.

Now to hear the full force of that verse you have to go back up to **John 1:1**, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* The Word was God and the Word became flesh. If the Word was God and the Word became flesh, then **God became flesh**. God became human.

Jesus Christ was human and Jesus Christ was God.

In his letters, John the Apostle says that fact is so fundamental to our faith that a denial of it constitutes an anti-Christian heresy, **1 John 4:1-3**, *“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This*

is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.”

That truth is so central to our faith that if you want to test any other religion or cult, ask yourself, "What do they teach about Jesus? Was He God made flesh, or not?" That is one of the critical tests of heresy.

Actually, as John wrote this verse, *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,”* no doubt he was referring to all those years of Israel’s wanderings in the desert; and he was making the point that, although those days were great days for Israel, in our day something much better has happened.

It involves all men. Not just Israel.

We know that John was making this contrast, because of an unusual word that occurs in the verse. The word for *“dwelt”* is the word for *“set up a tent”* in Greek. So we could also translate the verse, *“The Word became flesh, and pitched His tent among us,”* or *“The Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us.”*

I used to think that implied mainly that He was here only temporarily. But when I looked up all the places this word occurs in the New Testament, I found that it doesn't imply temporary status. For example, in **Revelation 21:3** where the eternal new heavens and new earth are described it says, *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place [tent, tabernacle] of God is with man. He will dwell [pitch His tent, set up His tabernacle] with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God.”*

This second translation [tabernacled] is particularly significant because the word refers beyond any question to the portable wilderness tabernacle of the Hebrew nation. The tabernacle was the center of their worship and the single most important object in their camp.

Everything about the tabernacle—its dimensions, furnishings, colors, functions, and arrangement—was designed to communicate spiritual truth. Hence, many of its functions were previews of the functions Jesus Christ would fulfill when He eventually pitched His tent among us.

More importantly, the Greek verb "to tent" is *‘skenoō’* here in John 1:14 resembles the Hebrew root *‘skn’* from which the Hebrew noun *‘shekinah’* is derived as the technical term for describing God's presence *“dwelling”* among his people. This grammatical connection is made vivid if we go back to the Israelite construction of the tabernacle in Moses' day.

The tabernacle was the dwelling place of God. Within the Holy of Holies, there was the Shekinah glory that symbolized God’s presence. The Shekinah was what we would call “light.” At times it was hidden by the cloud that spread out over the tabernacle. At other times it flashed out in judgment against some evil in the camp of Israel. The glory within the Holy of Holies symbolized the presence of God. Thus, John, who knew that God had been revealed in the flesh, in Christ Jesus, could write, *“we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

Because the tabernacle was the place where God dwelt among His people, it was also the place of revelation. It was the place where God met with them and spoke to them. For this reason the tabernacle was also called “the tent of meeting,” a phrase that occurs scores of times in the Old Testament.

The second tabernacle, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the place where God meets with us today and speaks to us. The tabernacle is a picture of Jesus, the meeting place where God's demands are fully met in terms of the sacrifice of blood, of a life poured out. Thus John saw in the coming of Jesus the fulfillment of that tabernacle: God's provision to meet the demands of the

Law.

I think what tabernacling **with us**, pitching a tent **with us**, implies is that God wants to be on familiar terms with us. He wants to be close. He wants a lot of interaction. If you come into a community and build a huge palace with a wall around it says one thing about your desire to be with the people. But if you pitch a tent in my back yard you'll probably use my bathroom and eat at my table. This is why God became human. He came to pitch a tent in our human back yard so that we would have to deal with Him **a lot**.

First, God is invisible.

Second, God revealed himself in the Law of Moses.

Third, God became human and set up His tent among us.

And fourth ...

v. 14, 18: IN JESUS WE SEE GOD

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ... No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known.”

Notice the phrase, *“We have seen **His** glory.”* Who does *“His”* refer to?

It refers to the Word. *“**The Word** became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory.”*

Back to verse 1, *“And the Word was with God and the Word was God.”*

So in Jesus we behold God — in Jesus we see the glory of God. This was the astounding new thing — that the Word of God could enter into our history as a man so that men and women could see Him.

In Jesus men and women could **behold God's glory**.

God came to live in a tent so we can **watch Him** more closely. God wants to be seen and God wants to be known **in His Son**.

The same point is made in verse 18. *“No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known.”*

Here the point is that even though God is a Spirit and is therefore invisible, according to John 4:24, He has now revealed Himself in an utterly unique way — by the incarnation of Himself **in His Son Jesus**. **In Jesus we see God**.

You don't have to wonder today if there is a baby in the womb of a woman eight weeks pregnant. And you don't have to wonder what it's like. We have sonograms and pictures and videos and detailed physiological descriptions.

And so it is with God. You don't need to be in the dark about God. He's gone beyond parchment and paper. He's gone beyond tapes and CD's and mp3's. He's gone beyond videos and DVD's and even beyond live drama. He's actually come and pitched His tent in our back yard and summonsed us **to watch Him and get to know Him in the person of His Son Jesus**.

When you watch Jesus in action, you watch God in action.

When you hear Jesus teach, you hear God teach.

When you come to know what Jesus is like, you know what God is like.

So what is God like?

What do we **see** when we see Jesus? John is very clear in what he wants to stress. We see the glory of God's grace and truth. Verse 14, *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

Then John repeats this in verse 17, *“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”*

The point is this: the essence of what God reveals about Himself in Jesus is, **first**, that He is **true** — that is, He is **real**, more real than all that you can see. Truth is the manifestation of reality, the unveiling of what is actually there, the stripping off of all the illusions, veils, shams, phoniness, the facades, and getting down to what is actually there. Jesus was full of both grace and truth. He was the ultimate revelation of what is really **real**, true truth, real reality; and He is the fullest expression of love giving itself, pouring out, reaching out to others.

That is the glory that John saw in Jesus.

In a sense everything that looks so real to us is like a short dream.

We know that from **2 Corinthians 4:18**, *“We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”*

God is truth. God is reality. And that is what we see in Jesus.

He is the way, the truth, and the life.

And **secondly** God is **grace**. God is free and overflowing and lavish in His goodness to sinful creatures. This is grace. This is the essence of God's reality because nothing reveals the fullness of His deity more than His grace. He is full, happy, and sufficient in Himself so that He doesn't need us to meet **His** needs but is surging with infinite energy and fullness to meet ours. That's His grace.

In Jesus we see God and know what He's like. He is the true reality and the fullness of grace. And the good news is not only do we see grace in the person of Jesus, but that ...

v. 16-17: IN JESUS WE GET GRACE

Which brings us now to the practical truth. What is the connection between all this revelation and you? Verses 16-17 gives us the answer, *“And from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”*

The first thing that John says was revealed in Jesus Christ was grace, God's grace. What is grace? Grace is simply the unmerited favor of God toward humanity. The great preacher, Dr. Harry Ironside, once wrote, “Grace is the very opposite of merit. ... Grace is not only undeserved favor, but it is favor shown to the one who has deserved the very opposite.”

The Bible expresses it when it says, **Romans 5:8**, *“God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

In other words, God is gracious toward us, not on the basis of what we have done but solely because it's His nature to be gracious.

In one sense, of course, all men are recipients of God's grace. That is what theologians have called “common grace.” All the blessings that people enjoy are the result of God's grace. If you're not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you're still a recipient of God's common grace whether you acknowledge it or not.

If you enjoy good health, that's common grace.

If you're not on the poverty rolls but instead enjoy the comfort of a home and plenty to eat, that's common grace.

If you have a good job and are able to hold it down because of your natural abilities and hard work, that's common grace. The list could be endless. There is no person alive who hasn't been the recipient of God's common grace in some way. If you think that it's not of grace that

you receive blessings but that you **deserve** them, you're merely showing your ignorance of spiritual things.

Yet, if common grace is wonderful, the grace shown in Christ Jesus is more wonderful. This is **saving grace**, for this is a grace that doesn't merely bless us for a certain limited time; it redeems us for all time and eternity. It transforms us from what the Bible calls "children of wrath" into children of God.

And so God came not just to show us grace **but to give us grace**; and we must receive it. God doesn't just want to stock your head with knowledge about His truth and grace, He wants you to receive it and experience it. He wants to give you a foundation of truth and reality to stand on so you won't cave in under pressure. He wants to treat you with grace — to forgive all your sins — all of them — to take away all your guilt, to give you a clean conscience, to help you with your problems, to give you strength for each day and to fill you with hope and joy and peace. Isn't that why He pitched his tent among us?

And isn't that what grace is all about?

CONCLUSION: *John Newton's Amazing Grace.*³

A great example of such a transformation is John Newton. Many of you know some of his story. In his very early years John Newton had been raised in a Christian home in England; but his parents died when he was only six years old and he was sent to live with an unbelieving relative. There Christianity was mocked, and he was abused.

Finally, to escape these conditions, Newton ran away, joining the British navy. He fell into gross sin; it gained an immense hold on him. He eventually deserted from the navy and went to one of the worst areas of Africa. As he tells it, he went there for only one purpose and that was **"to sin his fill."**

In Africa Newton fell in with a Portuguese slave trader. When the trader went away on slave-hunting expeditions, as he often did, the power in the compound passed to the slave trader's African wife. She hated white men and took out her venom on Newton. He was cruelly abused, so much so that at times he was forced to eat his food off the floor like a dog.

After a time Newton fled from the compound and made his way to the coast, where he signaled a slave ship. The captain of the ship was disappointed at first when he learned that Newton had no ivory to sell. But when he found that Newton could navigate a vessel, he made Newton a shipmate.

Even then Newton got into trouble. One day he broke into the ship's supply of rum and got so drunk that he fell overboard and would have drowned if an officer had not saved him by thrusting a harpoon into his thigh and hauling him back into the ship. The harpoon made such a wound that years later Newton could still put his hand into the fist-sized opening.

Near the end of one voyage, as they were nearing Scotland, the ship ran into bad weather, was blown off course, and began to sink. Newton was sent down into the hold to work the pumps. He was terrified. He thought surely the ship would sink and he would drown. For days he worked the pumps, and as he pumped the water out of the hold he began to cry out to God. Bible verses about God's love and the death of Christ that he'd heard as a child and thought he'd forgotten came back to him, and as he remembered them he was miraculously transformed. He was born again. He **received** God's saving grace.

When the storm had passed and he was back in England, he went on to become a well-

³ Two good sources to read the story of John Newton are *Great Conversions* by Frederick Leahy and *The Roots of Endurance* by John Piper.

known preacher and teacher of the Word of God, and through this experience, became a great proclaimer of God's grace.

Of course, we remember John Newton best for these words ...

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Newton was a great preacher of God's grace, for he'd learned, as all Christians learn, that God is exceedingly gracious. He'd been assured of this truth as he'd thought about the Lord Jesus Christ through whom God's grace is known.

And like John Newton, those of us who are most aware of our own sin and need, and who feel most deeply the wonders of the grace of God that has reached out and saved us, even us, are those who're most likely to talk about themselves as the **objects** of God's love in Christ Jesus.

And it is because we are the **beloved**, the ones so loved by Him, that He will change us and transform us, by grace alone.

We need to believe not just that the Gospel is true, **but that it is true for us**. **THAT'S** what will make us people who've been transformed by the love of Christ and who will then have that same love for our families, neighbors, bosses, students, even for those people who sit near us at church.

And perhaps, just for this morning, let's all trust this Word from God **more** than we trust our feelings or our experience. The gospel is trying to take you someplace you've never been ... into the **depths** of the **Grace of God**."

Perhaps we should pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

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