

Prevenient Grace

Text: "From first to last this has been the work of God." 2 Corinthians 5:18

I want to talk to you about "Prevenient Grace." Some of you are puzzled by the title, and wonder what it means. What is Prevenient Grace, or Preventing Grace, a term which is even better because it is biblical?

I can best answer your question by telling you a story first told by Dr. Leslie Weatherhead. It is about Hugh Redwood, a celebrated lay preacher in England. He was often invited, not only to preach in churches, but to address large public meetings. Thousands of people came to hear him.

At one period in his life, Hugh Redwood passed through a difficult time. He had some very hard decisions to make, and wasn't sure what he should do. He asked God for guidance, but as sometimes happens, it seemed that no guidance was given. The heavens were silent. One evening he went to have dinner with some friends before going on to address a large public meeting of several thousand people. When the meal was over his hostess said to him, "Hugh, don't wait around for the small talk; go upstairs to the study. There is a fire burning. Put your feet up and relax for a little while." Redwood was glad of a little peace and quiet, so that is what he did. He found, as promised, that there was a cheery fire in the grate. He sat down on an easy chair and noticed that on the table beside the chair was a Bible. He picked it up and discovered that it was open at Psalm 59. He began to read, and when he came to Verse 10 he found the words, "The God of mercy shall prevent me."

The word "prevent" is a word that has changed its meaning. Nowadays if we prevent somebody it means that we stop them from doing something. But when the King James Version of the Bible was produced the word "prevent" meant, "to go before." To prevent someone was to go before them. The text really meant, "The God of my mercy shall go before me." But somebody else had written another translation in the margin, and it found its way into Hugh Redwood's mind with such power that he never forgot it. The anonymous hand had written, "My God, in His loving kindness, shall meet me at every corner." For Hugh Redwood that text was light in a dark place. The hard decisions were made, and they proved to be wise ones. He went on to accomplish great things and to live a useful and fulfilled life.

Now that's prevenient grace! Do you know what it says to us? It tells us that God is not only behind us in forgiveness and with us as a loving, strengthening Presence; He is also out in front of us beckoning us into a future that is already filled with His goodness. In His loving kindness He meets us at every corner.

When I was at theological college, we had a Scottish professor who used to say, "Magnify your certainties!" The trouble with us is that we magnify our uncertainties. When we talk about the future we say that we don't know what a day will bring forth. And because we cannot see the future, we "guess and fear" as Robert Burns put it. We guess and fear when we ought to be magnifying our certainties. One of our certainties is that the future into which we journey is already filled with God. It is not empty. It is not totally mysterious. If we are Christians we believe that it is filled with

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a gracious Presence who beckons to us, and for our guesses and fears offers confidence and hope.

This can make an enormous difference to your life. Some people think that their life is like a line drawn on a piece of paper. They draw the horizontal line, which represents their pilgrimage, and then they draw other vertical lines across the horizontal line and say, "This is where God came in!" What they say is true, but it is not the whole truth, and it is not the best truth. You see, if the story of our life is like a line drawn on a sheet of paper, then God is not another intersecting line, but the page on which the line is drawn! He encompasses us at every point. There is no place at which His loving action does not touch our life. Dame Julian of Norwich expressed it perfectly when she wrote, "We are all in Him enclosed." That is, we are wrapped round by goodness and love. Not only forgiven for what is past and strengthened in the present, but drawn into a future that is filled with divine mercy.

Think, for a moment, of the difference that truth could make if you were to say to yourself whenever you find yourself in distressing circumstances, when you are anxious, when your heart is terrified at what tomorrow will bring, "My God, in His loving kindness, shall meet me at every corner." Wouldn't that be enormously strengthening and reassuring? Every life has its corners. We can't see around them and because we don't know what is waiting for us we are apprehensive. We are not sure what demand will be made upon our wisdom, or understanding, or courage, or fortitude, or sensitivity. And so we are afraid.

But suppose we were to say, and to keep on saying to ourselves, "God is already there! Before I enter this experience of anxiety or weakness, God is already present strengthening me for it and meeting me in it." Wouldn't that affirmation strengthen our confidence and renew our courage?

Every life has its corners, Think of some of them! I remember as though it were yesterday my first day at school. Do you remember yours? You found yourself in a strange place, entrusted to people you did not know. Do you remember the day you started university? You were pretty clever in high school, but in high school you were a big fish in a small pond. Now in university you were a small fish in a big pond. And you didn't know how you would measure up to the fiercer competition, and you were apprehensive.

Do you remember when you left home and took your first job? You were astonished that anybody would give you a job to begin with, and you hardly knew what you were going to do with it now that you had it. What if you failed? That was menacing, wasn't it?

Do you remember when you got married? We think it a happy thing to plan a wedding, and of course it is. But very often brides and grooms will say to me, "I am really afraid, I am not sure that it will work." They know how many marriages end in divorce, and wonder if they'll be able to make and keep each other happy.

Do you remember when you retired? Better still, do you remember when your husband retired? It meant you were going to have him around the house all day. That was menacing, wasn't it?

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You didn't know what you were going to do with the old boy. And he didn't know what he was going to do with himself. He had been a man of authority, and people had looked up to him, and he had an office to go to. Now that was all over, and the change was frightening.

And, of course, there is that corner which we all must turn because we are mortal. We go into "the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns." And that is the last menacing thing. It is what Heidegger called, "the iron ring around existence," the last horizon, the final mystery. And the thought of death can terrify us.

Think, then of the difference it makes when we know that in all of these threatening circumstances there is a mercy that goes before us to meet us at every corner. There is a young fellow in my congregation in London who is a fine hockey player. He was playing hockey one evening and was hit in the eye by the puck. He was brought to University Hospital and for a little while he didn't know how badly his eye had been injured. He said, "You know, Dr. Boyd, as I went up to the hospital I just kept saying to myself, 'My God, in His loving kindness, shall meet me at every corner.'"

One day I visited a woman from a rural community who had been brought to hospital in the city. She was terminally ill, and she knew it. She said, "As they were wheeling me along the corridors into one room after another to perform all those tests which leave you with little comfort and no dignity, I said to myself, as I turned this corner and that, 'My God, in His loving kindness, shall meet me at every corner.'"

I don't know what your particular predicament is; I don't know whether you are worried about your health, or your children, or your future, or your marriage, or your job. But I do know that an essential part of our faith is to believe that we are not alone in our trouble, and that the future is not hopeless. In His loving kindness, God is already there.

Now that is the first thing. I wanted to tell you what a difference it would make to every part of your life if you really believed that, "My God, in His loving kindness, shall meet me at every corner."

Here is the second thing. I want to show you that once you grasp the truth of preventing or prevenient grace, and have a sense of God always acting first, then no part of your understanding of Him will remain untouched. And it seems to me that this, more than anything else, is the message that the church needs to hear because the Christian Church in many ways has become a graceless church. We have lost the reality and the wonder of God's grace.

This is an open-ended sermon. I am going to toss out five or six instances of how our understanding of God is enhanced by the truth that grace is prevenient. I hope that you won't leave it there. Go on thinking about it. Find other examples in your own experience, other insights into your understanding of God which will be deepened when you believe that God always acts first.

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For example, notice what the truth of prevenient grace does to our idea of finding God. We sometimes talk as though we spent all our time searching for God while He spent most of His time trying to avoid us. We pursue one who is reluctant to be found. We cry out with Job, "Oh that I knew where I might find Him!"

How can I find God? That is like a bird asking, "How can I find the air?" or a fish asking, "How can I find the ocean?" We couldn't even think of finding God if He had not already found us! Do we not know that "it is in Him that we live and move and have our being?" It was Blaise Pascal who expressed the truth of this perfectly by telling us that we could not seek God if He had not already found us! We seek Him and the very power of our search is God's life in us. We pursue Him with our heart and the very motion of our heart is the action of His grace. We long for Him with our spirit, and what is our spirit but the candle of the Lord? We look for him with our mind, and He is the light of the mind that seeks Him. C.S. Lewis said that when people talk about their search for God it is like the mouse speaking of his search for the cat.

Religion at its best has always known this. It has known that the very best we can offer to God is but our response to His loving initiative. In other words, all true religion has discovered that God's grace is prevenient.

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;
It was not I that found, O Saviour true--
No, I was found of Thee.
I find, I walk, I love, but O the whole
Of Love is but my answer, Lord, to Thee;
For Thou wast long beforehand with my soul,
Always Thou lovedst me.

Prevenient grace! It reminds us that all our searching for God is a sign that He has already found us.

Here is another thing. Notice how the experience of prevenient grace enhances our understanding of repentance. When I turn on the television evangelists or listen to preachers on radio, my objection to most of them is not that they are too evangelical but that they are not evangelical enough. Do you know what they say? They say that if we repent God will forgive us. And they tell us that is the gospel. That isn't the gospel! Do you think it is? If you think it is then you need to adjust your thinking.

"If you repent God will forgive you" they say, but the whole trick is repenting. How do you do it? Of course if you repent God will forgive you. But how do you repent? The truth is that you can't repent without God's help. Your repentance is itself God's gracious work. You couldn't repent if He did not enable you to do so. It is not true to say that we repent and then God forgives us. He is already at work, graciously bringing us to repentance. For this reason it is not true to say that God forgives us because we repent. It is true to say that we repent because God has forgiven us. God's forgiveness of us in His gracious initiative reaching out to us and enabling us to

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repent! You see, the initiative is His. His grace stretches out to us when we don't know how to repent. John Donne put it splendidly, "Here on this lowly ground, teach me how to repent; for that's as good as if Thou hadst sealed my pardon with Thy blood."

Not long after we came to a church in Sarnia, somebody asked us, "Have you been to Bridgen Fair?" Bridgen is a small town not far from Sarnia, well-known for the excellence of its Fall Fair. Well, we hadn't been to Bridgen Fair, so off we went. Our daughter Jennifer was just a tiny little girl at the time, and we lost her at Bridgen Fair. We blinked our eyes and she was gone. We started to look for her, sick with fright. Have you ever read about the taste of fear? And you thought it was a mere figure of speech, didn't you? Let me tell you that it is literally true. There is a taste of fear, and I tasted it that day. I could imagine that tiny little morsel of humanity lost among all the people and the roundabouts and the animals. I could imagine her being absolutely terrified at not being able to find us. It took us about fifteen minutes to find her. We discovered her wandering nonchalantly about the place, having the time of her life, enjoying every moment of it. You see, the truth is that Jennifer didn't know she was lost until we found her.

You may think the gospel message is that if you are lost and return to God you will be reconciled and forgiven. But the gospel is better than that. The gospel is that He comes to seek and to save us before we know we are lost. That's prevenient grace! Said P.T. Forsythe, a great theologian, "Don't tell people how they ought to feel about Christ, Preach a Christ who will make them feel how they ought to feel."

Let me tell you another way in which prevenient grace deepens our understanding of Faith. This one has to do with our forgiveness of other people. I remember having a church in which a woman came to see me and told me: It's a terrible thing, but when I was a tiny little girl my father did things to me that I can't forgive. I have been trying all my life and I can't find it in me to forgive him. And when I come to church, I hear the words of Scripture and they seem to say that if I don't forgive my father, God won't forgive me; that we are forgiven only if we are willing to forgive. But I cannot forgive. This makes me think that God has closed me out, that I am beyond the reach of His mercy. What am I to do? Her distress was very great.

What would you have said to her? I answered her by saying, "What if God really loves you, and loves you not because of anything you have done or left undone, but loves you first?" I said to her, "Suppose that He isn't standing over against you, making a demand, issuing an ultimatum by saying, 'If you don't forgive him, I won't forgive you.' What if God is already on your side, helping you to do what you cannot do in your own strength? What if He doesn't merely ask that you forgive, but enables you to forgive?" The woman went home to think about what I had said, and a few weeks later we met together in the empty church and she renewed her vows of church membership. Do you know what she had discovered? She had discovered the reality and wonder of prevenient grace. In the strength of that grace she had come to forgive her father. It is by being forgiven that we are enabled to forgive. Said St. Augustine, "Demand what thou wilt, but first, give me what Thou dost demand!" That is exactly what God does, and we call that loving initiative preventive grace.

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Notice how the same idea will illumine our understanding of Christian assurance. The doctrine of Christian assurance is very precious to me because I was brought up a Methodist, and one of the cardinal doctrines of Methodism is that you not only may be saved, but may have the assurance that you are saved. But while the assurance of salvation is a Methodist doctrine, it made me feel very uncomfortable. What bothered me was that so many of the people who were sure of their salvation were insufferable. They were not only sure, they were cocksure. They were arrogant. They used their assurance of salvation to make other Christians who were less sure feel inferior.

But it's not enough simply to complain about them. We ought to discover why they offend us. Is it just their presumptuousness? Is it their condescension? Is it their arrogance? It is all of these things, but that isn't the heart of their offensiveness. I think I know what it is that disturbs me about them. It is that they regard Christian assurance as something which they themselves have accomplished. They wave it like a flag, wear it like a medal. And that isn't Christian assurance at all. Christian assurance isn't anything we have accomplished or achieved, it is something which God has done. It is His work, not ours.

Suppose you were to ask how I know that my wife loves me. I could go two ways on that. I could say, for example, "How could she help it?" And if I were to say that, you would do one of two things; you would either groan and say, "Well, how insufferable can you get!" or you would have a good chuckle. Now that's one way of answering the question, but there is another way. Suppose I were to say to you, "Well, I know my wife loves me because in her great kindness she constantly reassures me of her love." Now, you see, that's different, isn't it? Because that assurance is not in me, it's in her. It is not something of which I can boast, it is something for which I am thankful. It is not something I have accomplished but something which she has bestowed. It doesn't lead to arrogance but to humility. It is not anything I have achieved, but something I have received

Christian assurance is like that. It is not something we possess as though we had done it ourselves. It is something which God graciously does for us. And that's the wonder of it. Our assurance is but a response to His gracious initiative who in His great kindness constantly reassures us of His love.

Just one thing more. Notice how prevenient grace sheds light on our understanding of our own good works. Sometimes we think that we have a claim on God because we are good. The New Testament reveals this quite clearly. Do you remember the Pharisee who strutted in the Divine presence having made a kind of inventory of his goodness, and boasted of his virtue? What he did not realize is that even our goodness is God's work in us. It's not something we may use to establish a claim on Him; it is something which He has accomplished in us.

Let me tell you another story about the Jennifer we lost at Brigden Fair. Not long after we arrived in Sarnia, we planted three thousand tulip bulbs. It was a small garden or we would have planted more. And the next spring, one of them came up. And one day Jennifer went into the garden and plucked this tulip. She brought it in and gave it to her mother as a gift. Now that was pretty silly, wasn't it? It was her

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mother's tulip all the time. My wife had planted it, and looked after it. It was hers. It wasn't Jennifer's to give to her. And yet she received Jennifer's gift with smiling face, and thanked her for it.

It is like that with God. We come to Him bringing our goodness and presenting it to Him as a gift, when all the time it is His work, who is the Fountain of all goodness. And He is so gracious that He is honoured by our gift, and receives it lovingly. That is the greatness of God's reticence and humility. He accomplishes everything, and yet allows us to think that the work is all ours! We need to remind ourselves often that,

Every virtue we possess;
And every conquest won'
And every thought of holiness;
Is His alone.

I hope I have said enough about prevenient grace to enable you to go on thinking about it, and to find further instances of it in your own experiences. You see, it's really very simple. It just means that before God makes any demand of us He enables us to give Him what He demands. He enables us to do what He requires of us. And that means we are never without His help. We are never rejected. We are never forsaken. We are never alone.

Let me tell you just one more story. It is about Dr. Campbell Morgan who was a great preacher in England some years ago. One day he went to visit a member of his church, only to learn that she was to be evicted from her house because she couldn't pay the rent. That was on Saturday afternoon, so on Sunday Campbell Morgan told his congregation that he wanted enough money from them to pay the woman's rent. They gave it to him. First thing on Monday morning he went to the woman's house with the money. He could hardly wait to tell her the good news. He hammered on the door, but there was no answer. What a disappointment! He knocked again, but no one answered, and he went sadly away. Some time later he discovered that the woman had been at home all the time. She had been afraid to answer the door, for she thought it was the landlord who had come for the rent, and all the time it was her minister bringing her the money she needed.

That is like our misunderstanding of God. We think he comes making a demand when what He really does is bring us a gift.

The sermon is over, and yet I can't quite leave it there. You see, it's not enough for me to say to you, "If you believe what I have told you it will make a difference to your life." I must say something more if I am to be true to my message. I must say to you that in this very instant, in this moment while you are listening to my voice God is graciously present enabling you to believe and to trust His goodness. And that's prevenient grace! The moment you believe it and receive it your religion ceases to be a burden. Rather, it becomes the kind of burden wings are to a bird, and sails are to a ship.