

The Grace of God

Acts 20:13–38

March 17, 2002

“I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” How great is the mercy and goodness of God! God is gracious to us though we despise him. God is good to us despite our evil. God has mercy upon us though we deserve to be condemned. More than we can realize, more than we can imagine, more than we can comprehend, more than we can ever know, God has showered us with his mercy, grace upon grace, to reclaim us as his very own. To God be the glory!

It is this unmatched mercy which is the content of the gospel. It is this grace beyond all measure which makes up the good news. It is this relentless searching for us, this searching which always finds us, that makes up the gospel of God. Good advice is not good news. Even a good example is not good news. Moral instruction is not good news. Political wisdom is not good news. Those things may be helpful, but they cannot give us life. Good news, which awakens the heart, which renews the mind, which heals the wounded soul, and which turns lives around has to do with overflowing rivers of grace and ocean depths of mercy. It travels on the winds which blow through the Solar System and which chase the galaxies across the sky. It holds together the nucleus of every atom. It heals “the sin-sick soul.” This good news of God alone is what we need. This alone is what we ache for. This alone is good for us. This alone is reason to live.

It is not the case that we have to search for this gospel. It is not hidden. We do not have to seek for it in faraway places. We do not have to discover it on our own. We do not have to invent it, or to make it up, or to assemble it. Instead, we are told of this gospel. Testimony is borne to this good news. Even as the world tells of its creator, so is the gospel proclaimed. So is the good news preached. So is the witness made throughout the world. It is public information. The good news seeks us out and finds us where we are. It comes to us. It is spoken to us. The grace of God is communicated by the word of God. And, by the power of the Holy Spirit, it works within our hearts and souls to yield faith and repentance.

How does God show us his mercy? It is not a secret wisdom. It is not a private teaching. It is not an ancient philosophy or a new psychology. It is, instead, present, real, and actual in the person, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is the location of the gospel. He is the reality of the grace and mercy of God. He is the place not only where God is real but also where God is made obvious, where God is seen, where God is known, where love and mercy “flow mingled down.”

Apart from Jesus Christ, we have nothing. Apart from him, we have no saving knowledge of God. Apart from him, we have no grace or mercy. Apart from him, we have no good. Apart from him, we have no life. Apart from him, we have no hope. But with him, we have everything. With Jesus Christ, we know the truth of God, eternally the Father of the Son, eternally the Son of the Father, forever loving and merciful, pouring out upon us grace upon grace. This is why we magnify and exalt Jesus Christ. This is why we cling to him and proclaim him. Jesus Christ is God’s gift to us. Jesus Christ is God’s grace and mercy. Jesus Christ is God’s gospel and good

news. Jesus Christ is light and life. Jesus Christ is the glory of God and therefore is our salvation. Praise be to God!

Jesus Christ is not only the source and content of the gospel of grace, but he is also the source and content of the ministry of that gospel. Jesus Christ gave Paul's ministry to him and to the church. Paul was running the other way as hard as he could. Some of us know what that means, to be running that hard, to be headstrong, to be going in our own direction. Paul was persecuting the church. He was arresting Christians. He was feared and despised. Paul did not volunteer to be a minister. The elders did not suggest that he was gifted in that area. He was not recruited by a seminary. Nobody gave him a scholarship. Jesus Christ himself turned Paul around and pointed his life in a new direction. Jesus Christ himself gave Paul a ministry which he did not seek, for which he did not consciously prepare, and which he could never have imagined. It was not a human possibility. It was not a human accomplishment. It was a gift from God through Jesus Christ. It was a hard gift. It involved beatings, stonings, imprisonments, suffering, and afflictions, all of which is more evidence that this is not something Paul sought. Jesus Christ himself gave the church his own ministry in and through the work of Paul. Paul did not ask for this. The church did not ask for it. Paul did not seek it out. But it was given to him anyway, by the direct will of God, by the initiative and action of Jesus Christ.

But what a gift, what a precious treasure it is! Paul was single-mindedly devoted to fulfilling the ministry he had been given, and it was more important to him than life itself. "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." This has nothing to do with Paul's stubbornness or determination, though we may think he had plenty of both. This has nothing to do with any notion of self-importance. Instead, this has everything to do with the overwhelming wealth of the grace of God, with the overarching worth of the gospel of that grace, with the incalculable importance of testifying to it, and with the infinite value of Jesus Christ. Next to that, we are nothing. The ministry is nothing. The church is nothing. And yet, at the same moment, we are everything, for the infinite mercy of God in Jesus Christ is poured out upon us! The gospel is for us! The grace of God is for us! Christ is for us! God has reclaimed us as his very own! Now we belong to God! Thanks be to God!

Words fail to express the enormity of this gift. Paul had wept when he had told of Jesus Christ. For three years he did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. When he could say no more to them, he knelt down and prayed. And then they wept over him. When we see the beauty of Christ, when we realize that he has never hated anyone, when we face the fact that he suffered in our place, when we see in him the heart of God, what else can we do? He has captured us for himself. Our hearts belong to him. All that we are and all that we have belong to him. We are his. This is our good and our life.

But not everyone cries for joy at this news. There are other forces beside the gospel at work in the world. Besides the grace and mercy of God, sin, death, and evil are on the rampage. They are defeated powers, but they thrash all the more violently in their own death throes. And where else would they rather strike than at the heart of the church, at the congregation of the faithful, at the gathering of those who have heard the gospel, at the communion of the agents of God's mercy? The dangers are not only out there in the hostile world; the dangers are within the very church of Jesus Christ. No wonder that Paul said to these elders, "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son." The church does not thrive on lack of

attention. The church does not fly on auto-pilot. The church cannot get along by being ignored. Instead, it calls for caring. It calls for the leaders to care for each other and for the whole congregation, the whole denomination, the whole church of Jesus Christ around the world.

Why is the church to be cared for? Why is it to be cherished? Why is it to be nurtured and protected? Because it is valuable. The church was purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ. Nothing in the world costs more than that. Nothing in the world is worth more than that. If we mean that much to God, if the church means that much to God, should we not take better care of the church? Should we not love one another? Should we not forgive one another? Should we not be gracious and merciful to one another? Should we not care for one another? Should we not bear each other up?

There is always grave danger standing near the church. There is always the danger that the gospel will be muted, that the word will be distorted, that the good news will be dampened, that the grace of God will be replaced with tolerance, that the mercy of God will be mistaken for mere inclusivity, and that Jesus Christ will be one example, if that, among many. Paul says, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." That is, there are enemies outside the church and there are enemies inside the church. We can be disappointed by that, but we should never be surprised. Instead, we should be on guard. There are forces outside the church which would like to divide it, so as to destroy Christian fellowship and take away the plausibility, if not the possibility, of preaching the grace and mercy of God, the reconciliation of humanity to God and therefore of us to each other. Against them, we stand together. There are also forces inside the church which would like to divide it, ambitious leaders seeking more to promote themselves than to glorify God and his Christ, persons willing to destroy Christian fellowship by destroying the truth, by teaching perversions, by drawing people away into little groups, trying to make the rich mercy of God appear to be worth nothing. Against them, we stand together.

These dangers are no less true today than they were then. It is not yet time to let down our guard. We who have received the wonderful mercy of God and have been incorporated into his church are to continue to care for each other, to care for his church, and to care for his gospel. This is our life. This is our calling. This is who we are. We have been graced by God. We have been made into his one church. There is nothing in the world more valuable. Thanks be to God! In so far as is humanly possible, in so far as it is up to us, we are to resist those who pervert the gospel and not allow them to divide the church.

We are not all ministers of the word today, but all of us have a ministry which we have received from Jesus Christ. We are not all elders overseeing the congregation, but all of us have a part in caring for the church and caring for each other. We are all members of the church, or members to be, for we are all recipients of the overflowing grace and mercy of God. We all have a course of life to live, for we have been taken from death and given to Jesus Christ. We all have a ministry to fulfill, for there is good news to live and to tell. We all have a master to serve, for by our toil we are to help the weak. We all have a Lord to love and to obey, for we have received so much, and now it is our privilege to give. Such is the great mercy and grace of God.

Thus do we learn to say with Paul, "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." How great is the mercy and goodness of God! God is gracious to us though we despise him. God is good to us despite our evil. God has mercy

upon us though we deserve to be condemned. More than we can realize, more than we can imagine, more than we can comprehend, more than we can ever know, God has showered us with his mercy, grace upon grace, to reclaim us as his very own.

“And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

*To God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be all praise, honor, and glory
now and forever! Amen.*

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