

THE NECESSITY OF GRACE

Galatians 2:20-21, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."

How important is God's grace to you? Do you feel it is absolutely necessary to recognize and live in God's grace daily, or is it optional on some days or most days?

The story is told of a man of God who saw a criminal being led to the gallows to be hanged for his crimes. The man of God said, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." He knew that without God's grace, he should suffer the same fate as that condemned man. Have you ever felt that? If not, you may need to accept personally and deeply the grace of God. What is the grace of God? We will think about that based on Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians. This message contains four highlights from chapters 1,2,5 and 6 of Paul's letter to the Galatians: In this brief look at Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians, we will look seriously at Paul's rebuke, Paul's testimony, the necessity of grace, and the fruit of grace. May each of us grow to appreciate the absolute necessity of the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

First, Paul's greeting and rebuke of the Galatian Christians. Look at verse 1-5. "Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen."

Paul introduced himself as an apostle sent from God the Father and Jesus Christ. Actually, the Galatian Christians knew Paul already. In fact, he had preached the gospel of Christ to them, and many of them became believers through Paul. Then why did Paul remind them that he was an apostle sent not from men, but from God? It is because they started listening to some false teachers. I'll explain this later.

Paul loved to use every opportunity to talk about Jesus Christ. What did he want to remind them about Jesus? Jesus gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age. God raised Jesus from the dead. In other words, Jesus died on the cross for our sins, and then rose again from the dead, physically. This is the gospel in its simplest form. This is good news for all people. We must not change this good news of God.

Paul then gave them a blessing of grace and peace from God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul also gave praise to God, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Usually at this point in his letters, Paul thanks God for those he is writing to. But unusually, in this letter, Paul does not have any words of thanks here. Something is really bothering Paul.

Look at verses 6-10: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ."

Paul reprimanded the Galatian Christians for turning to another gospel, that is, to another way of salvation. What? That's right. Some false teachers were trying to lead the Galatian Christians down a different path to God. When we read the whole letter, we see that these false teachers were strict Jews who were teaching that non-Jewish believers in Jesus had to follow all the Jewish laws to be saved. They had to be circumcised like all Jewish men. They had to keep dietary kosher laws like all good Jews. And they had to keep all the sacred holy days that the Jews kept. This is how Jews without faith in Jesus thought they could obtain righteousness. It was by observing all the laws of God and all the traditions of the elders. Paul knew this way of life very well as a Pharisee before believing in Jesus.

We learn from Paul that we must be careful what gospel we are believing and proclaiming. Paul strongly condemns any man or angel who preaches a way of salvation other than Jesus Christ. What is the gospel that you believe and proclaim with your life, words and actions? There are multitudes of false gospels that try to guarantee salvation and eternal life apart from Jesus Christ. It could be the claims of other religions or philosophies or talk shows. It could even be religious things that people do, like prayer, fasting or giving to the needy. Those are good things to do, but they do not earn our way into heaven. Only Jesus Christ died for the sins of those who trust him in faith. Only Jesus Christ rose from the dead to give living hope in his kingdom to those who believe in him. This is the gospel that Paul and the New Testament proclaims. There is no other gospel by which we must be saved (Jn 14:6; Ac 4:12; 1Ti 2:5). As Christians, we must be clear about this, and follow no other gospel.

Second, Paul's personal testimony. In verses 11-24 Paul gave them his own testimony. He testified that what he preached was not his own idea. It came directly from Jesus. In fact, formerly Paul had hated Christians and persecuted them, thinking that he was doing a service to God. But Risen Jesus appeared to Paul, forgave his sins, and sent him to tell non-Jewish people this message of salvation through Christ. The followers of Jesus were surprised to learn that the one who had persecuted them was now preaching the faith he once had tried to destroy. And they thanked God because of him.

Moving into chapter 2 of this letter, Paul begins by explaining how he went to Jerusalem and set before the Christian leaders the gospel that he proclaimed among the non-Jews. They could see that God had called Paul to speak to the non-Jews, and they accepted him as a brother in Christ.

Next in the letter, Paul explained how he had to rebuke Peter publicly for hypocrisy. Peter ate freely with non-Jews. But when some strict Jews visited, Peter avoided mingling with the non-Jews. Peter gave in to the pressure of the strict Jews who wanted to require that the non-Jews must follow the Jewish laws and way of life. So Paul rebuked Peter publicly saying, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" Paul rebuked Peter for not living in line with the gospel.

Listen to what Paul says next in verses 15-16: "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."

Did you hear what Paul just said? Paul says that no one will be justified, that is, declared righteous before God, by obeying God's laws! Why not? It is because no one can perfectly keep all of God's laws. The law of God only tells us what we should do. It doesn't help or empower us to do it.

Here's a school example. Has anyone here scored 100 points, perfect scores, on all exams you have ever taken? I don't think so. Similarly, no one has ever scored perfectly on God's report card. Well, there is one: Jesus Christ. That's right. Jesus Christ was without sin. But he who knew no sin, became sin for us. Do you really appreciate that fact? Listen to 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him [Jesus] we might become the righteousness of God." That is amazing, wonderful, marvelous, and undeserved. It is a bit crazy. Or as I hear the younger gens say, "That's fire." That is grace.

May I share a brief testimony? I grew up going to church. At age 18, my dad died of a heart attack. I was confused and not sure what I believed about God and heaven. At that time, sins of lust and pride were escalating in my life. Six months later, in my first quarter of college, I was invited to Bible study and cautiously accepted. Studying God's word gave me joy. After six months, at a Bible conference, I believed Jesus died for my sins and rose from the dead to give me living hope in his kingdom. Since that time, I've been declaring this gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Mark 8:35 is my life-guiding Bible verse: (Jesus said) "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." I turned 61 this past week. Even so, I still try to save my life in many small ways. But Jesus calls me still to lose my life for him and for the gospel. And I intend and pray to do so, by the grace of God. Let me ask you something: Do you have a testimony of God's grace in Jesus Christ to you?

Third, the necessity and practical meaning of grace. Now let's look at the key verses, 2:20-21: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."

Let's look first at verse 20. What did Paul mean when he said, "I have been crucified with Christ"? Obviously, Paul had not been nailed to a cross. At least not yet, though he suffered much for Christ. Paul did not say, "I have been crucified for Christ." He said "with Christ." It makes more sense when we hear the rest of what Paul says: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Paul was united by faith with Jesus in his death and resurrection. How did this happen? By the grace of God, Paul realized Jesus loved him. And he accepted that love, and loved Jesus back. He had an inseparable love relationship with Jesus Christ.

It has been said that Christianity is not so much a religion; it is a relationship with Jesus Christ. Do you know that Jesus lives and Jesus loves you? Have you received his love for you? Do you love Jesus? That is faith in the Son of God, who loved you and gave himself for you. Your life is no longer your own. You were bought with a price. You belong to Jesus. You no longer live for yourself—for money, for pleasure, for pride, or for selfish ambition. You live for Christ. You live in Christ as a new creature, a new person, a child of God. This is the gospel of God's grace.

Now look at verse 21. "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose." Paul said, "I do not nullify the grace of God." The word "nullify" is interesting. In English, null means zero, notta, nothing. So to nullify means to make it worth nothing—useless or of no value to you. I started this message with a question: How important is grace to you? Do you regard it as nothing? On a scale of 0 to 10, what is your score of God's grace in Jesus Christ to you? If you regard yourself as a pretty good person, his grace may not mean much to you. So how can we tell how much his grace means to a person in their life, in your life, in my life?

Fourth, the good fruit of grace. Here is where verses in chapter 5 and 6 are very helpful. In chapter 5, Paul contrasts living by the flesh, that is, by the sinful nature, with living by the Spirit of God. Listen to 5:16-18, "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law."

Living by the sinful nature, that is, to please ourselves, is contrary to living by the grace of God. Paul describes living by the sinful nature in 5:19-21, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." Why did Paul warn them? Obviously, some Christians were persisting in lives of sin. They were not serious about following Christ or being united with him in spirit. They were not crucified with Christ and were not growing in their love relationship with Jesus. They still loved the world and themselves and were not really serious about following Jesus.

Then how is living by the grace of God and the Spirit of God different? Listen to 5:22-26, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another." It is especially good to memorize the 9-fold fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those who live in the grace of Jesus are growing in the fruit of the Spirit. Remember and recite these words when you feel depressed or tempted. Pray for this fruit of the Spirit. And pursue and practice them by the grace of God.

Finally, I want to note a few ways in chapter 6 that Paul gives to live by the Spirit. Listen to these five verses and put them into practice day by day by the grace of God. Pray to practice even one of these today.

6:1, "Brothers (and sisters), if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted." Help people who are clearly in sin, with a spirit of gentleness, to come to Jesus for forgiveness, healing and grace.

6:2, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." Help people to carry a heavy burden. That is real help and the fruit of love.

6:6, "Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches." Let people who are a godly influence in your life know and see how much you appreciate it.

6:9, "And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." Don't quit or give up doing good in the name of Jesus. You will reap a good harvest from what you sow in due time.

6:10, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." Find opportunities to do good to all people, especially to fellow Christians.

The last verse in this letter fits very well into our study of grace. It says, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers (and sisters). Amen" (6:18).

In conclusion, let us not believe or proclaim any other gospel but the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us have and be ready to share a testimony of God's grace to us. Let us recognize and declare by faith in Jesus that we have died with Christ to sin and to our old selfish lives, and we no longer live, but Christ lives in us. May we not nullify but rather grow in the love and grace of Jesus Christ, by the work of the Holy Spirit.