

“Outrageous Grace”

Part 6: Count It All Joy

Philippians 3:1-12



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I want to invite you to think with me today about one of the most important and most misunderstood words in our vocabulary as Christians. It's the word GRACE. Martin Luther's quest to bring clarity to this word back in the 16th century triggered the Protestant Reformation and I think many people continue to stumble over what this word means today as well. So let me start out by giving you a simple definition of this word: Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.

Let me follow up this definition with a story. A young man went to bed one night and when he woke he was standing at the gates of heaven. St. Peter asked him if he wanted in. "Of course, he said. Why should I let you in?" St. Peter asked. "Well, I've earned it," he replied. "Really? It takes 100 points to get in you know," said St. Peter. So the man began to recite his good deeds and Peter gave him the proper points. He was an honest, hard worker on his job. One point. He was faithful to his wife and family. Three points. He didn't cheat on his income taxes. One point. He prayed daily and sang in the choir. Two points. The man began to run out of things to say and he only had a total of 7 points. Then he remembered that he tithed his income. 3 points. That bumped his total up to 10.

Peter wanted to help him out and so he asked why he did all these good things. He said it was because he trusted in the grace of Jesus Christ and wanted his faith to be a concrete demonstration of his love for God. "Bingo!" said St. Peter! (At least that's what some people think he said.) "That does it. You're over the top. You've got a thousand points!" You see, you can do all the right things, but they won't save us. It's not the good things we do; it's the grace God gives us that saves us. These things we do are never a condition of our salvation in Christ but a consequence of it.

Let me say a little more about that. One of the great myths of Christianity is that you can somehow earn or even buy your way into God's favor. Unfortunately that myth was actually perpetuated by the church. Just for fun I've been reading a historical fiction account of the heated controversy that took place with the translation of the Wycliffe Bible. The Roman Church argued that grace was something you could purchase. Indulgences were sold to people who wanted to be forgiven for their sins or make sure their loved ones would wind up in heaven. The church even gave a cut of the proceeds to the government so that both King and Pope stood to benefit.

But grace is not something you can earn or buy; it's a free, unmerited gift. Now, to be sure, we all fall short of our own standards not to mention God's standards for our lives. That's the nature of the beast. Paul says, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

We're not perfect people who are even capable through strong self-discipline to consistently do the right thing. I know from my own life struggles that I am far from perfect. I make mistakes constantly; I am a sinner; but I am a *forgiven* sinner because of the gracious action of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

As we look at the opening verses of Philippians chapter 3 which we've been exploring over the past several weeks, we find Paul warning us to beware of any teaching that leads us to believe our relationship with God depends on anything but the grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ. Here's what he says: *Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh — even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.* (Philippians 3:2-4).

What Paul is talking about is LEGALISM. Legalism is a kill-joy. It squeezes out the joy in your life. Legalism says your status with God depends on what you must do for God rather than on what God has already done for you. Back when Paul was planting new churches this myth was floating around, largely because most of the early Christians were Jewish. Jewish converts felt that if you became a Christian you also had to keep all of the Jewish laws: you had to be circumcised, you had to observe the dietary laws, and a thousand other rules and regulations found in the book of Leviticus.

So appropriately Paul tells the people to "watch out for the dogs," as he puts it. My dog might think that's a complement. Paul is telling me to give Scooter the attention he deserves. Watch out for the dogs." But this was not a complement; this was a criticism. In Paul's day, dogs were not pets; they ran wild. They were scavengers that would sometimes attack people. So Paul is saying, "Watch out for those who preach legalism." Why? Because such teaching completely ignores the saving work that our Lord accomplished for us through his death and resurrection.

Paul says, "Hey, I know what I'm talking about because I once thought legalism was that way to God. I was the chief legalist. I tried to do all of the things I thought God expected of me."

In verse 4 of chapter 3 he says, *If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the house of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

What is Paul saying: 1. Resist Legalistic Attitudes. Don't believe for a minute that because your parents or grandparents were Christians, you have somehow been grandfathered in. Don't that because you go to the "right church" or the "right school" that you have earned God's favor. Don't believe that all of the great things you do for others: your volunteering in the community or at church have somehow earned you the brownie points you need to get on God's good side.

Now, don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with any of these things. Certainly God wants us to love our neighbors. The problem is that we will never accumulate enough points because that's not the way God works. Paul says it is by faith through grace that we are justified before God. It is grace and grace alone that saves us. Where does that grace come from? It comes to us through the saving act of God in Jesus Christ.

2. Re-Order Your Priorities. Paul understands this so using his own life as an example, he tells us about a shift he made in his priorities. They didn't have spread sheets in his day but think of what he says next as a kind of Profit and Loss statement. In verse 7 he writes: *Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.* (Philippians 3:7-9)

Paul says, all those things I just listed I moved from the profit column to the loss column. Because when you think about it, they're worthless when it comes to trying to earn your salvation. All those things I just listed add up to a big, fat zero.

What does Paul now put in his profit column? One thing: to gain Christ and be found in him." He based this on the free, unmerited grace that comes from knowing Jesus Christ. He is saying in effect that "for a long time I was focusing on all the wrong things. I thought they would bring meaning into my life; I thought they would lead me closer to God. But I was wrong. The things I once valued I value no more." And here's the interesting thing: in that shift Paul discovered true joy.

The biggest thing we give up when we sign on to be a follower of Christ is the ownership of our life because we come to realize it's no longer ours. It becomes his. Paul says, "Christ in me; the hope of glory." Paradoxically, when you give up everything you've got you discover that you've never had it so good. A lot of people think that when you become a Christian you can't have fun anymore. But living for Christ is a joy-filled adventure! Here's one person's assessment of the trade-off that took place when this person became a Christian,

- I gave up guilt and I gained a clear conscience of forgiveness and grace.
- I gave up worry and I gained a power for living;
- I gave up frustration and a lack of meaning and I gained a real sense of purpose;
- I gave up trying to solve all of my problems on my own strength, and I gained the powerful resource of God to help me work things out and a hope for the future;

I consider that to be a pretty good trade-off, don't you? I'm not much of an accountant but I consider this side to be a lot more valuable than that side of my P and L statement. All those things I used to hang on to because I thought they were so important I gave up willingly because of what I received in return: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So here's a question: What are you afraid to give up for God? Whatever that is may be the very thing that is robbing your joy. You see, grace is the key to joy. In fact, the two words go together. In Greek, the word for grace is the word "charis"; the word for joy is "chara." Both have the same root. Grace and joy are connected.

And to recognize that everything God does in you and through is by grace is the secret of joy.

Then the third and final thing Paul invites us to do is: 3. Refocus your ambitions. Paul says, I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death. . . I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." (Philippians 3:10-12) Paul says, My number one goal is to know Christ better and better.

The word *Yada* in Greek means: "To know" = intimately, experientially. There a difference between knowing about someone and really knowing that person. The first kind of knowing is superficial: it comes second-hand from articles on the Internet or in magazines or newspapers. The other kind of knowing is personal; it comes from spending time with that individual; times when they open their hearts and reveal their true selves to you in an open, intimate, loving manner. That's the kind of knowing Paul is talking about when he says, "I want to know Christ."

James Forbes, senior pastor at New York's Riverside Church, describes his relationship with Christ by saying, "Jesus is my friend. He is the one in whom I find the invitation to wholeness, the clue to forgiveness for my sins, as well as the promise that I can live a life that increasingly honors God, loves others, and serves the world — rather than being a person who continues to spoil the dream of the Creator."

This, friends, is the surpassing value of knowing — really knowing — Christ as Savior and Lord. One of the best ways to get to know someone is to have dinner with them; to really talk with one another. We have that same opportunity this morning as we break bread with our risen Lord around the communion table. I invite you to drink deeply from this well of God's amazing grace, to let this table bring peace and hope and renewal to your mind and heart that you need. How fortunate we all are to be able to feast on God's outrageous grace!